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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JULY
35¢

MIKE SHAYNE
and MAGIC in
MURDER PLAYS CHARADE
A Thrilling Novelet
By
BRETT HALLIDAY

THE SUSPICIOUS BRIDE
A Short Novel of Suspense
By JOHN C. FLEMING
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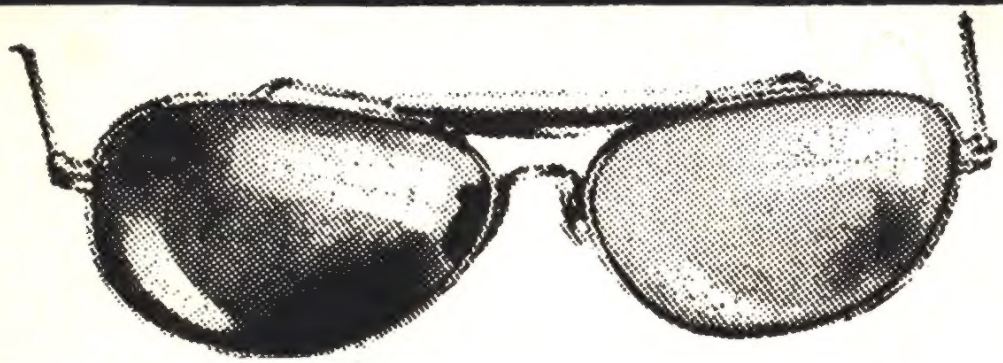

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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JULY, 1959 VOL. 5, NO. 2

NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

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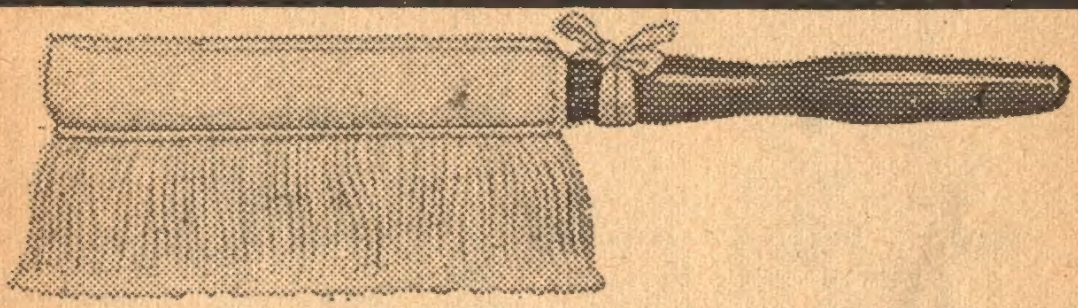

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Magicians who perform startling feats do not as a rule wind up murdered. But Mike had some grave and dangerous misgivings on that score.

MIKE SHAYNE and MAGIC in MURDER PLAYS CHARADE

A Thrilling Novelet

By BRETT HALLIDAY

HER VOICE WAS cold, hollow, disembodied, like an echo in a mausoleum. "I have come to warn you, Michael Shayne," she said. "If you ignore what I have to say you will be guilty of murder."

Had Miami's lanky, broad-shouldered, redheaded private investigator not been blessed with an immunity to hangovers, he would doubtless have jumped to the ceiling. He distinctly remembered having closed the office door earlier in the morning before seating himself at his desk.

The door, leading into the small outer office of his absent secretary, Lucy Hamilton, was still closed, and he was so alert and sensitive to its familiar click that it could rouse him out of the deepest slumber.

"Who are you and how did you get in here?" yelled Shayne at the apparition.

Only her lips moved when she spoke. They were crimson lips, moist, voluptuous looking, and the redhead's experienced eye noted that, oddly enough, they were not made up. The words did not seem to come from her. An automaton, ghastly beautiful, a soiled wax figure from Madam Tousseau's, yet with piercing dark eyes that were the opposite of wax-like.

"I am Kara," she said. "A Gypsy. Also, I am a clairvoyant."

Shayne fumbled through his pockets for his cigarettes.

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"You won't find any there," said the Gypsy absently. "Look in the upper right drawer of your desk, behind the gun."

Shayne did so, without thinking. He drew forth a fresh pack, still almost automatically, but with slowly dawning amazement. He glared at it for a moment, then banged it on the desk. He swiveled back in his chair almost at right angles, tugged his left earlobe, and probed the Gypsy girl with hard gray eyes.

Girl, hell. She could be any age —twenty, thirty, forty. Her pale, copper-hued face gave no clue at all as to her age. Her hair, black and much too greasy, was cut short and chunkily. She wore enormous brass earrings, and her wrists and forearms were heavily festooned with bracelets. A faded red silk shawl hung loosely over her bare shoulders, and her cheap black cotton dress was cut so low in front that the redhead winced— not from embarrassment, but from a kind of vague, hard-to-define disapproval.

He reached for his wallet, extracted a crisp, fresh dollar bill, crumpled it with one hand, and tossed it to her. She caught it deftly, yet with scarcely a perceptible movement of her body.

"Thanks for the fortune," he said, lazily swinging back to an upright position. "And I promise not to murder anybody. Now if you don't mind, I've work to do."

Kara's eyes were daggers. Her body was actually becoming alive. Her face, too, became less mask-like and a faint pink flush crept into her cheeks and dispelled the ghastly pallor. Her hand rose to her forehead, and she said tensely, "I see him now . . . lying there . . . his face covered with blood."

"Anyone we know?"

"Voltane."

"Don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"My husband. The greatest magician, the greatest human being who ever lived!"

She leaned over the desk, letting the crumpled bill drop from her fingers. "You have beautiful hands. Michael Shayne" she whispered. "So strong, so powerful. They are the hands of a good man, a kind man. It would be sad to see them become the hands of a murderer."

Shayne said, "If you have any sane reason to believe that your husband will be murdered, why don't you go to the police?"

"Police?" She laughed scornfully. "I despise them "

Shayne banged his fist down on the desk. "What do you expect *me* to do?"

She was again the wax figure. "Be at the main gate of the Biscayne Arena tonight at nine. Voltane is the star attraction. You will be met by a man in Voodoo witch-doctor's costume. Follow him."

The redhead pulled his sprawling bulk together, arose, strode around the desk and faced her. "Sorry, Kara," he said solemnly. "If you have any more murder tips give me a ring. Only, please make sure they've already been committed."

He was leading her out gently, but she saved him the trouble. Miraculously, with neither rush nor sound, she arrived at the door, hand on knob. He listened for the familiar click. When it came he was annoyed with himself because it somehow grated on him.

With a final, mocking look, she eased backward out of the office, closing the door silently after her.

Shayne turned back to his chair and tore open the pack of cigarettes on the desk. He lit one, inhaled gratefully, then hauled out a bottle of cognac from the lower desk drawer. Uncorking it, he drank heartily.

But, *dammit,* he never kept cigarettes in that drawer!

Then he noticed the dollar bill he had given Kara lying crumpled on the desk. He put down the bottle, picked up the bill. As he smoothed it out for its return to his wallet, a written message stared up at him from its surface. It was a single line in capital letters, crudely scrawled in red crayon: YOU HAVE NO CHOICE

It was a switch on the Gypsy switch, all right! But then . . . suppose he had given her an old *worn* dollar bill? Or a five, or a ten? This was a single buck, and though crumpled, was as fresh and crisp as if it had come straight from the mint.

Kara . . . ham or devil? Ham, undoubtedly.

But *what* a ham!

II

THINGS HAD promised to be slow in the office this morning, and Michael Shayne had drifted in only to check the mail. Besides, it was Lucy's birthday, and he had vowed to himself that for once nothing was going to interfere with their being together. It was agreed that she was to make all the plans herself, surprise him, and that he would bow to her craziest whim, cheerfully and without question. The whole idea was a little wacky and might wear him down, but the prospect was at least novel enough to make him feel like a schoolboy embarking on his first date, so what harm could it do?

It was shortly before lunch time when Lucy burst into the office, looking very mysterious, very trim, and very pretty. Her soft brown eyes opened wide at the sight of her employer. "Why Michael, what on earth is so funny? If we start off with a secret you won't share with me, the whole day will be spoiled."

Shayne swallowed a final chuckle. "I'll explain later, Angel.

Meanwhile, when do we sail forth under sealed orders?"

"As of this very moment. Anchors away! I'm starved"

"So am I, Commander," he said, rising with an exaggerated salute. She returned it snappily. "I suppose," he grinned, "I'd be put in irons if I dared ask what destination?"

Lucy smiled indulgently. "Destination—a rosy-tinted childhood. First, a picnic in Biscayne Park. Wait until you see the lunch I've packed—it's in your car now. Then you're going to take me rowing. And *dinner?"* She was giggling like a little girl. "Hot dogs, hamburgers, popcorn, ice cream cones, absolutely lousy coffee—"

"Acute indigestion. Do we have to take all of this quite so seriously?"

"Of course we do. Won't it be fun, Michael darling? Look—" She produced a printed envelope from her handbag and waved it at him. "Ten-fifty each, but I got them!"

"Got what?"

"The tickets, Michael darling."

"Tickets for *what?"*

"For the Arena tonight, and stop yelling. It's the last night of the Shriners' Charity Carnival."

THE GIGANTIC OVAL bowl that had been the Biscayne Arena on South Miami Avenue and Fourth Street was now a dazzling, boisterous, carnival midway, with monster trimmings. Through the tawdry splendor spun the song of Sweet Charity, notably at the bar—probably the most unlikely, and preposterously formidable structure of its kind ever assembled at short notice, even in the state of Florida. It ran the entire length of the Arena, and it was jammed.

High bosoms and stuffed shirts, red-fezzed Shriners and TV celebrities, Broadway columnists and multi-married millionaires and heiresses—the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker—jostled one another on the sandbarked floor, agape and agog, as eager to be clipped as the ripest hayseed.

Mammoth banners hanging from the top row of tiers luridly proclaimed sword-swallowers, fire-eaters, freaks and hula girls, and a merry-go-round whirled giddily to the thump of a wheezy music-machine over which a brass band stubbornly refused not to be heard.

At the far end, directly opposite the bandstand, stood a wide stage with center steps leading down to the foot of an aisle dividing roped-off rows of wooden benches. The red plush curtains were closed, and overhead, lengthwise, a banner gloated: THE GREAT VOLTANE

It was the first thing that caught Michael Shayne's eye when he and Lucy entered the Arena a little after eight, following an exhausting, mad and, to Lucy at least, heavenly childish day. She had squealed with delight at the redhead's ac-

count of the Gypsy's warning that morning, and how she had flim-flammed him with her tricks of magic. Both agreed that whatever the gypsy's angle had been in wanting him present at the show tonight, Lucy had given her more than an even break in just happening to buy the tickets as a last-minute whim.

By the time they fought their way to the bar and downed two brandies they were hungry again. They elbowed over to the nearest hot dog stand, close to the main entrance, and ordered both frankfurters and salt water taffy. Suddenly Lucy lifted her little-girl, mustard-smeared face from a pink cloud of candy floss, and yipped.

Shayne turned. Mr. Witch-doctor, all right, fearsome in hideous horned mask and tattered burlap, a glistening python draped over his huge shoulders.

It was exactly nine o'clock. The music stopped, and over the loudspeakers a voice announced that the world famous Master of Mystery was ready for their approval; those who did not have reserved seats could see by facing the stage.

The houselights dimmed, drums rolled, and Voltane's red curtains flamed in the glare of a battery of powerful overhead spotlights. The snake served amply as a motorcycle escort, and in no time Mr. Witch-doctor had the redhead and his secretary seated on the aisle, second row center.

Sleek, white-haired, impeccable, Voltane cavorted back and forth across the stage like a ballet dancer. Applause greeted his appearance in a puff of smoke. Clusters of doves burst in midair at the snap of his fingers, showers of playing cards descended from everywhere; then, from nowhere, with the whipping away of a large oriental cloth which he had held for an instant over a small stool, sultry, smouldering, Kara the Gypsy.

Time moved breathlessly as miracle topped miracle, and such was the artistry of Voltane that, despite his allergy to magic, the redhead unknowingly had joined his secretary in the paradise of childhood. He squeezed her hand, and she snuggled close.

Now came the Master's Masterpiece, the Ultimate in the Impossible, with which he had been astounding the world for more than thirty years, the feat which even Houdini had been too terrified to attempt.

Voltane gripped the microphone, and smiled satanically down at the front row. "Corporal, are you ready?" he asked.

A good-looking young man in marine uniform arose, sprang up the steps leading to the stage and shook hands with the magician. He had intelligent blue eyes, close-cropped blond hair, and as he spoke through the microphone, his voice rang firm and clear, "Cor-

poral Burton Adams, United States Marines, MAG-Thirty-one, Miami.

Applause.

"Also," beamed Voltane, pointing to the glitter of medals over the left pocket of his snug-fitting tan shirt, "are you not the champion marksman of your outfit?"

Blushingly the young man conceded that he was.

There was more applause, followed by an expectant silence.

"Here is a standard thirty-caliber rifle. Will you inspect it, please?"

The marine caught it from a turbaned male assistant. He balanced it in his hand, twirled it expertly, opened the chamber, peered down the barrel, sighted it. He nodded. "Good enough for me, sir," he said.

"And you have brought your own bullet?"

The young marine produced one from his shirt pocket.

"You will notice," emphasized the magician as Adams dropped it into a plate held out by Kara, "that at no time do I or any of my assistants ever *touch that bullet.* Now, would someone in the audience kindly mark it for identification?"

Kara glided down the steps. A man, far to her right, his features indistinguishable to Shayne, dug into the nub with a small knife. Then he nodded and dropped the bullet back into the plate.

Returning to the stage, Kara was elaborately careful to keep the bullet in view as she took her place by the marine's side. He plucked it from the plate, inspected the mark, inserted it into the chamber of the rifle, locked the chamber, then port-armed smartly.

"You have your instructions," said Voltane ominously, whereupon the youth dove off the stage into the dazzling pool of light that suddenly beamed from sharp, monster spotlights. He charged down the long, narrow, surging aisle held open by struggling uniformed Arena guards until he reached a tall, tower-like structure directly in front of the bandstand.

He climbed nimbly to the top, and over the roll of drums his voice came tensely, "Ready!"

All eyes darted back to Voltane, who was now mopping his face with a white-silk handkerchief handed him by Kara. "The corporal will now aim at my mouth. I shall release this handkerchief. When it reaches the floor he will fire. His own bullet, marked by a total stranger, I propose . . . *to catch in my teeth!*"

Even the bar was as still as a tomb. The drum roll became louder and more menacing, and the audience shifted uneasily. The Turbaned One whisked away the microphone, and Kara slithered to the side of the stage opposite Shayne and Lucy.

"Corporal Adams . . . take aim!"

Head high, shoulders back, the magician dropped the handkerchief which he had been holding at arm's length, and Lucy Hamilton's fingernails dug deep into the redhead's arm.

But in this split-second Shayne was aware only of Kara's eyes. As the handkerchief billowed to the floor they were spitting hate at him, and her body seemed to be swaying.

The report blasted the Arena. Shayne saw the Great Voltane suddenly a grotesque heap on the floor, blood spouting from his mouth and from a hole where his Adam's Apple should have been. Nearby, Kara lay slumped in a dead faint, her face ashen.

III

THE CURTAINS closed in quickly behind Shane as he vaulted to the stage, dragging Lucy after him. The band, with futile heroism, was trying to down the roar of panic. He bolted to the prostrate magician's side as stagehands, firemen, assistants, rushed from the wings.

The Turbaned One was hovering over Voltane's body. Shayne slammed him back, fell to his knees and ripped open the blood-drenched evening collar and shirt. He searched desperately for some sign of life . . . then noticed something lumpish—it was too large for a clot—oozing from the dead man's gaping mouth.

He leaned closer, whipped a handkerchief from his breast pocket and under its cover plucked the object from Voltane's lips. It was the nub of a bullet. He quickly slipped it into the folds of the handkerchief, and wiped the blood from his fingers. Then he quickly returned the handkerchief to his outer breast pocket, and arose.

Lucy Hamilton, flanked by two weeping girls in devil costumes, was vigorously massaging the hands of the unconscious Gypsy when she felt the redhead's grip on her shoulder. Pale and still trembling, she looked up at him without rising. Her lips were set very tight.

Shayne whispered almost savagely into her ear, "Get out of here fast! Grab a cab home, and type out in duplicate as much as you can remember of everything that happened here tonight! Every tiny detail! I'll check with you later."

As she left, a tall, distinguished-looking man in dinner clothes and pince-nez glasses rushed to Voltane's side, but Shayne turned away at the sound of a familiar voice behind him.

"It's a mighty good thing you're here, Mr. Shayne," exploded Jim O'Leary, chief of the Arena guards. "All hell's broke loose out front. The fire department—"

"Get that marine back here fast!" yelled the detective over the din.

"Sure, if you say so—and if he isn't already trampled to death."

Shayne turned back to the corpse. The tall man in dinner clothes rose stiffly, and with a faint suggestion of a smile hovering unpleasantly around the corners of his mouth. "He must have died almost instantly," he said. Then he added coldly, "I am Dr. Vogle."

"Dr. Herman Vogle, the psychiatrist?" asked Shayne, dimly recalling that the man was equally famed as an amateur magician and authority on psychical research.

"I'm Michael Shayne, private investigator," the redhead said. "Could you tell me anything about how this trick was *supposed* to have worked?"

The doctor's eyes bulged at him through his pince-nez glasses like some fabulous fish. "I think," he snapped, turning, "I'd better take a look at the girl first."

Ten minutes later, Will Gentry, Miami's Chief of Police, cigar in hand, hurried into the scene trailed by the usual battalion of uniformed policemen, detectives, photographers, and Medical Examiner, Dr. Cantrell. He bustled over to the redhead, his eyes mock-reproachful. "Do you always have to be ahead of me, Mike? What happened here? Just from the look of things—I'd say it was on the unusual side."

Shayne grinned. "I just committed murder."

"Wouldn't put it past you. How'd you manage it?"

While cameras flashed and Cantrell was leaning over Voltane's corpse, Shayne told his old friend the story, omitting any mention of Kara's visit to his office that morning, or the bullet hidden in his breast pocket.

Gentry scowled. "Sure that's all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"Enough to inconvenience you by making you the number one material witness! I'm sorry, Mike but that's what I may have to do. Now where's the marine and who was on the stage with the magician when he was killed?"

"O'Leary's bloodhounds are after him now," said Shayne. Then he pointed to the Turbaned One. "He was standing to Voltane's left, and—" he gestured toward Kara—"she was on his right."

Kara was still out cold, her prostrate body now covered with the oriental cloth behind which she had mysteriously appeared at the beginning of the show, and Dr. Vogle, on his knees, was holding something to her nose.

The Turbaned One's ugly, pock-marked face contorted in a sneer as Gentry, followed by Shane, demanded his name. Finally he grunted, "Kling."

"Kling what?"

"Willie Kling."

Gentry re-lit his cigar with stub-

by fingers. "How long have you been with Voltane?"

Willie shrugged. "Five—six years."

"Did you always assist him in the bullet act?"

"Kling nodded, his eyes still hostile.

"Exactly what did you do to assist him?"

Willie slowly removed the turban from his head. With it wiped his face, which was gleaming with sweat and grease-paint. "Not much. Just stand by, see nobody jobbed him."

"What do you mean 'jobbed' him?"

"Frame him," replied Willie in a bored tone. "Gimmick the gun, mebbe. Or the bullet. Some wise guy."

Shayne moved in harshly. "How does the trick work?"

Willie didn't even bother to look at either inquisitor. "If I knew I'd have done the damn thing myself!" He pointed at the sheet-covered corpse now being carried out on a stretcher. "Ask *him,*" he said, still glaring.

Medical Examiner Cantrell had joined Vogle by Kara's side. He shook his head as Gentry and Shayne arrived. "It is more than just a faint, Will. Something funny. Her heart seems sound enough, but damned if we can hear it. And there's no pulse. I agree with the eminent Dr. Vogle. She should get to a hospital fast."

"With the Chief's permission," said Vogle suavely, arising and extending his card, "I'd be glad to take her to my sanitarium."

Gentry nodded vaguely, then signaled a nearby officer to call an ambulance. Aside, he muttered to Shayne, "That leaves the marine."

Shayne grinned. "It's the other way around, Will. Probably the marine has left us. Better call the base and have the shore patrol pick him up. Corporal Burton Adams."

As Gentry shouted the order, a red-faced, heavyset man with graying temples tapped him on the shoulder. "I'm Mack Eiler," he said in a raspy voice, "manager of the Arena and president of the Showman's League. I'd have been back sooner if it hadn't been for that crazy mob."

Gentry turned and puffed hard at his cigar, frowning into the cloud of smoke. "Tell me, Eiler, know anything about Voltane's stooges? The men he got to shoot at him?"

"He didn't use stooges, Chief. Each one was a legitimate volunteer and known to me personally. I contacted them myself and briefed them according to Voltane's instructions every night—he only did the tricks nights, you know—and they brought their own rifles and bullets. That's what made it so sensational. He even had the magicians half off their rockers trying to figure it out."

"Did you know the marine?"

"No," replied Eiler thoughtfully. "He was a stranger to me. I wondered about it at the time, don't think I didn't. I had a friend of mine all set, and then, at the last minute, Voltane sends out an assistant to tell me he's got somebody else."

"Who did he send?"

"Willie Kling."

"Know anything about Kling?"

"Only that he used to be an escape artist. He worked for me in the old days when I had my own big carny. Nothing Houdini did that he couldn't do better. Only he couldn't sell it. It made him bitter. He hated everybody."

Shayne cut in pointedly. "Eiler, did you see the act tonight?"

Eiler shuddered. "I did. I watched that damn trick every night. I've done a bit of magic in my day, but this really had me stumped."

Shayne regarded him closely.

"Think carefully. Did you notice anything that departed from the usual stage procedure tonight? Anything added or omitted, any change, no matter how slight?"

The showman's weather-beaten face furrowed in concentration. "I almost know the presentation by heart," he said, "from the pitch right up to where he catches the bullet in his teeth and the mark is identified by the man who made it. Outside of the marine seeming a little too well rehearsed, I'd swear everything was just the same."

"Thanks, Eiler," grumbled Gentry, then hurled himself valiantly at the wilted members of Voltane's company. He was getting nowhere fast when a detective appeared and handed him the marked bullet. "Found it on the floor near the back wall, Chief. I traced it through a hole in the asbestos backdrop—eight inches thick."

Gentry squinted at it with puffy eyes, then handed it to Shayne. "Can you make out the mark, Mike?" he asked.

Shayne peered at the bullet intently, angling it around in his fingertips. "Right now I'd say it was the capital letter N," he said. He returned the bullet to Gentry.

The Police Chief wrapped it in his handkerchief. As he thrust the bundle into the pants pocket of his ample rear a second detective rushed up with: "No record of any Burton Adams at Marine Headquarters, sir, and everybody present or accounted for."

A very strong aroma of Bourbon suddenly assailed Shayne's nostrils over his shoulder. He didn't have to turn around to suspect it came from Timothy Rourke, fabled crime reporter of *Miami's Daily News*. But turn he did, grabbing the skeleton of a man by the collar and yanking him aside.

"Listen, Tim," he whispered

into the reporter's ear, "I've never given you a bum steer, have I?"

"On stories, no," conceded Rourke, grinning. "On dames, yes."

Shayne sighed. "If you want to shoot for a second Pulitzer Prize, play it my way. Have your New York man check with the magic editor of the *Billboard* and the *Daily News* morgue, but fast! Get me all the dope you can get on this guy Voltane. But *keep your trap shut!*"

Rourke's slaty eyes grew slightly animated. "Sure, Mike, if you've really latched on to something big."

IV

THE BISCAYNE ARENA'S emergency lights cast eerie shadows in the dead magician's off-stage dressing room. It was close to midnight, and no sign of life remained in the building other than the handful of uniformed policemen left on guard by Gentry—and Michael Shayne.

A solitary gaunt shadow himself, he had a distinctly unpleasant feeling of unreality as his narrowed eyes pierced the gloom. Through the vast silence he could hear the cooing of doves, nothing more. A human hand lay on top of a small trunk, gruesomely convincing even at close view. Other phantoms of the magician's art loomed ghostly and mocking, and from a leather picture-frame beside a crystal ball, Kara's oblique black eyes were fixed on him hypnotically.

Shayne stared back. A faint stir of air lightly caressed the back of his neck, and the Gypsy's eyes seemed to be telling him to search further.

He turned toward a huge battered wardrobe trunk. It was open wide, and the right half held Voltane's shirts and street clothes in neat array. The left half consisted of a bureau-like series of drawers. He pulled out the top drawer. It was filled with evening ties, collars, handkerchiefs and unopened packs of playing cards. He was about to close it again when his eye caught something odd.

Perhaps it was only an illusion due to the way the shadows struck it, but to Shayne it seemed that the face and sides were a good three inches or more deeper than the inside.

His hand darted within. He rapped sharply, his strong, firm fingers eliciting a hollow sound. He snatched a nail file from the makeup shelf. As he was about to pry open the false bottom he was blinded by a sudden flash of light, accompanied by a sharp pain at the back of his skull.

He fell forward into a darkly swirling sea of nothingness . . .

It was nearly ten the next morning when he awoke in Lucy Hamilton's bed. A throbbing, nauseat-

ing pain was shooting from the back of his head down his body to the tips of his toes.

Police Chief Gentry was seated by his side, and Lucy was staring at him with bitter reproach. There was concern in her eyes too, but her anger made her speak sharply. "You almost had a concussion! Will phoned me the minute he got the report from the Arena, and I brought you back here from the hospital in a cab. I slept on the couch." She handed him a cup of steaming black coffee. "Drink this."

Shayne put his hand gingerly to his head, felt the bulky gauze dressing and winced. "Put a shot in it, Angel," he groaned.

"I already did," she said. "Two. But if you had any sense you wouldn't need spiked coffee."

Gentry helped him up to a sitting position. "They found a monkey wrench in Voltane's dressing room after you got conked," he rumbled. "It had bloodstains on it, but unfortunately the handle was wrapped in a towel. So—no finger prints."

Shayne sipped the coffee royal gratefully, slowly coming out of the fog. "What else did they find?" he asked.

"That you had pried open the false bottom of a drawer in Voltane's trunk," replied Gentry pleasantly. "The boys figured you swiped something. So they frisked you and found the nub of a thirty-caliber bullet wrapped up in your handkerchief."

"It didn't come from the trunk. It came from Voltane's mouth. I found it there just a few seconds after he got shot. Go on."

Gentry scowled at the dead cigar butt in his slightly unsteady fingers. "I don't like saying this, Mike, but I'm giving you fair warning. If you're holding anything back, if this bullet should turn out to be an important bit of evidence in what might—I say 'might'—just happen to be a case of murder, you're in hot water. And this time don't count on friendship!"

Shayne downed the last of the coffee royal. He felt his strength returning, poked his long legs out from under the bedcovers, thumped his bare feet on the floor, and sat upright. Lucy stuck a cigarette in his mouth, held a lighted match to it.

"Angel," he said, "bring in your notes from last night."

He turned to Gentry. "You'll find a detailed, eyewitness account of everything that happened from the beginning of Voltane's pitch up to the moment Lucy and I hit the stage. You're not going to get very far, Will—unless you find out exactly how that trick would have been pulled off if nothing had gone wrong with it."

Gentry dropped the wet cigar butt into a dainty pink-and-white porcelain ashtray on Lucy's bed-

side table. "I'll know a lot more," he growled, "when I lay my hands on that phony marine! And I'll get him—even if I have to call out the marines themselves!"

Shayne was on his feet, his lean, muscular body enveloped in a sheet, when Lucy returned with five neatly-typed pages. He checked them briefly. "Good girl," he said, and handed them to Gentry. The latter folded them carefully, slipped them into his inside coat pocket, arose, put on his cap and looked very official.

After he departed Shayne, still wobbly, took a quick shower in Lucy's bathroom, wearing her green rubber cap to protect the wound on his head. Over her protests he staggered into his clothes, downed two fast shots of brandy, and kissed the tip of her nose.

He called out as he left, "Thanks, nurse! I'll check with you later at the office. Watch for an important call from Tim Rourke."

"Michael, darling! Take care!"

The combined residence and private sanitarium of Dr. Herman Vogle loomed hugely as Shayne drove through the main gate, swirled along a winding graveled road flanked by neatly landscaped palm trees, and parked alongside the building.

Vogle was leaning over a massive mahogany desk, scribbling on a pad, when the detective was ushered into his book-walled private office by a thin-lipped, slightly annoyed nurse. He did not look up, even when Shayne seated himself in a comfortable leather chair, crossed his legs, lit a cigarette and blew clouds of smoke across the desk. Shayne's head was killing him.

Finally Vogle raised his eyes. "I'm very busy, Shayne. What do you want?"

The redhead took his time. "I'd like to talk to Kara."

"Impossible. She cannot be disturbed. She must remain here with me until I see fit to discharge her. When that will be, I cannot predict. Good-day, Mr. Shayne."

"Doc Cantrell said there was something queer about her condition. What is *your* diagnosis, doctor?"

Vogle banged his pencil down on the desk. "Are you a relative, sir?"

"Sorry," said Shayne, "but this happens to be a police matter. Kara, just like you and everybody else involved, is under technical arrest pending investigation of murder."

Vogle whipped off his glasses, wiped them with his handkerchief, perched them back on his nose. "The patient," he said irritably, "seems to be in a state of catalepsy. Strictly speaking, though, it's not a true catalyptic state. More of a 'trance,' as we say in psychical research. Sometimes it is caused by traumatic shock;

sometimes, as in the case with certain types of spirit-mediumship, it is self-induced."

Shayne ground out his cigarette in a bronze ashtray shaped like a striking cobra. "I understand you have quite a collection of magic books. Mind if I look at them?" he asked.

Vogle nodded stiffly. "They won't help you," he said. "They were intended for the trade only. They're guardedly written, and in highly technical terms. You could spend a year studying the Houdini collection in the Congressional Library and still know nothing about the bullet trick. He knew about it, of course, but—" Vogle shrugged, letting the sentence hang.

"Isn't it just barely possible that some member of his company would know?"

"Not necessarily. He was a diabolically clever man, and he trusted no one."

Shayne rose unsteadily, his head throbbing. Then he saw the smile suddenly vanish from Vogle's face. He was staring across the room, his expression cold as ice. Shayne turned—blinked.

Vogle remained motionless.

Posed on the stairway in the same lurid evening gown she had worn during the performance, was Kara. Her black, oblique eyes were searing him, not with hate now, as they had from the stage the night before, but with appeal and a half-accusing desperate kind of helplessness.

Her silver-slippered feet seemed scarcely to touch the floor as she moved toward him. "I warned you, Michael Shayne," she said huskily, "but you would not believe me. Please take me away from here."

Vogle's face purpled with rage. "Kara! Go back to your room at once! I won't warn you again."

She seized Shayne's arm, her lips tightening. "My will is stronger than yours!" she said, glaring defiantly at Vogle. "I am leaving. Come, Michael Shayne."

Vogle jumped to his feet, "You heard what I said, Kara. If you disobey me I promise you the consequences will not be to your liking."

"That's for her to decide, Vogle," Shayne cut in harshly, leading Kara to the door. "And what's more, you're committing an illegal act by attempting to hold her against her will. She hasn't been certified as insane."

V

DURING THE DRIVE back to the Edgemont Hotel, where she had been living with her late husband, Kara maintained a strange silence. She just stared ahead vacantly, not crying, but with tears steadily trickling down her highboned cheeks.

At the hotel she insisted on changing back into the Gypsy

garb she had worn when she had visited his office the previous morning—brass earrings, bracelets, baubles and all.

Shayne helped her check out and into a comfortable residence hotel room around the corner on Northeast Second Avenue and Eleventh Street, then took her to a nearby restaurant.

In the curtained-off privacy of a booth, Kara devoured a steak while Shayne toyed with scrambled eggs and toast. He ordered a brandy and soda for himself, and coffee for Kara at her request. When the waitress had cleared away the dinner plates he spoke sternly.

"All right, let's have it. What made you so sure your husband was going to be murdered?"

She regarded him with swollen, red-rimmed eyes. "I told you. I am clairvoyant."

"So you're clairvoyant. But you *knew* something. What?"

A faint, disdainful smile played around the corners of her mouth. "Are you not often helped by what you call 'hunches?' A sudden intuition—the flash of an idea from nowhere—something that explodes in your subconscious and makes no sense at all at the time?"

"We won't argue about that. What I don't understand is why didn't you warn your husband instead of me?"

"But I did!" she cried. "I did! I even threatened to leave him! But he only laughed at me."

Shayne offered her a cigarette, which she refused. He lit one for himself, studied her through a cloud of smoke, then switched his line of attack. "Did he have any enemies?"

"No, not really. He didn't have many friends, either." She stirred her coffee slowly, half smiling. "He was very jealous of me."

Shayne tugged at his left earlobe. "Tell me how he did the bullet trick."

She leaned back with half-closed eyes. "If I only knew, Michael Shayne, if I only knew. As close as we were, he kept it a secret even from me."

He drained his glass slowly, then spoke in an offhand manner. "Did your sixth sense tell you your husband had a bullet in his mouth when he was murdered?"

The color slowly ebbed from Kara's face.

Suddenly she was the Gypsy woman with the tawdry aura of mystery about her again, her eyes darkly veiled. "The bullet that killed him!" she whispered. "Did you see the mark?"

Shayne decided to ignore the evasion. Let her play it her own way. She was holding back something, but perhaps it would all come out if he let her talk. Perhaps this was her way of telling him. Perhaps she had become so steeped in her own particular

brand of hocus-pocus that she now firmly believed her own line.

"What about the mark?"

Kara leaned closer to him. "Stop fighting me, Michael Shayne," she said. "Copy that mark down on a piece of paper, fold it up, and I will do the rest."

Grudgingly, the redhead took a letter from his pocket, and tore off a small piece of the envelope. On it he jotted down the capital letter "N," folded the paper in halves, then quarters. He placed it in the palm of her outstretched hand.

He watched her closely as she closed her eyes, and pressed the slip of paper to her forehead. Suddenly she froze. "Quickly, the car!" she exclaimed, her voice rising. "There is not a moment to lose."

Miami's midtown traffic was at its usual worst, and it seemed even more so to the redhead because Kara was directing him, and admittedly had no more idea of where they were going than he had.

Her eyes were closed, and she was clutching the slip of paper tightly in her right hand as she pointed straight ahead on Northeast Second Avenue. He wheeled out of the parking space, cursing inwardly, and nosed into the thick, honking traffic.

As they approached the third intersection Kara cried, "Turn right." Four blocks further she spoke again, more quietly this time.

Left, right, left again, until they were out of the city limits and clipping along south on Flagler Highway. As they reached the outskirts of Leisure City, a bright, crisp little town some thirty miles from Miami, she told him to slow down. They made two more turns before she stopped him in front of a liquor store on the ground floor of a nondescript but tidy two-storied building a short distance from the beach.

She opened her eyes for the first time. "You thought you wrote the letter N," she said, her eyes shining. "But when you hold it this way—" She unfolded and reversed the wad of paper—"it's the letter Z!" She pointed to the sign over the store window. It read: GEN. ZAMBONI—*Prop.*

Vaguely irritated, Shayne followed her to the door. It was locked. He rang the bell, long and hard. Finally he heard footsteps from within the house, slow and ponderous. A bolt clicked and the door swung open.

Kara stiffened and cried out, her voice shrill and accusing. As Shayne took a quick step toward her she pointed without hesitation at the figure in the doorway.

"He—he marked the bullet that killed my husband!"

Shayne saw a tall, florid, handsome man, possibly in his late sixties, but with the carriage of an

athlete. He had bristling white hair, a black mustache, and his mournful brown eyes were extraordinarily alert.

"Sure, sure," he said in an Italian accent, "I marked the bullet all right." He appeared visibly shaken. "The death of this lady's husband was a terrible thing."

Shayne said, "I'm Michael Shayne, private investigator."

"And I am General Zamboni. Come in if you like, please," he led them through the store into a back living room. An array of rifles stood in double rows in a wide, glass-doored cabinet by a narrow, ascending stairway at the far end, and on the mantlepiece, in an ornate gilt frame, stood a faded photograph of a strikingly beautiful woman, a theatrically coquettish smile on her lips. Something about the eyes seemed dimly familiar to Shayne.

He said sharply to Zamboni, "You say you marked the bullet that killed Voltane. Exactly what kind of a mark did you make?"

"My initial" Zamboni said. "The letter 'Z'."

"Why didn't you report that fact to the police immediately?"

Zamboni looked at him forlornly. "Is it really important?"

"You ought to know it's important! Your failure to report it could get you into trouble. It's even worse to run away from the scene of a crime, when you're in any way involved."

"I will report it," said Zamboni wearily.

Shayne lit a cigarette with slow deliberation. Suddenly he asked Kara, "How long have you two known each other?"

Kara was sitting grimly on a hard, straight backed chair. "I never saw this man in my life before last night. That was when I went into the audience and he marked the bullet."

"She is speaking the truth," said Zamboni.

Shayne eyed him coldly. "Did you know Voltane?"

"No, I did not know him either."

Shayne tugged at his left earlobe, then remarked casually. "I'm curious about your arsenal, general."

"Shooting was my business," Zamboni said. "Forty years ago I headlined every vaudeville theater in the world. They called me an even greater shot than Annie Oakley! I still am. Every day I go out on my beach and practise." He started to get up, his eyes flashing. "Come, I show you—"

"I believe you," Shayne said. "There's no need for a demonstration." He arose a little wearily. "Better report that bullet marking to the police. I may want to question you again, but you needn't let it worry you."

Five minutes later he was driving back to Miami with Kara at his side.

Kara slept peacefully all the way home.

VI

POLICE HEADQUARTERS was a three minute drive from Kara's residence hotel, where Shayne deposited her. He found Chief Gentry at his desk, thumbing through a large volume of MAGICIANS' SECRETS by Fred Keating, his face ludicrously distorted in puzzlement. Similar tomes were stacked by his side, and Lucy Hamilton's type account of last night's tragedy was spread before him—four neatly prepared sheets.

"Where the devil is Kara?" demanded Gentry as the detective entered, slamming the book shut. "I just left Vogle, and if I meet another such uncooperative headshrinker I may be forced to have myself committed. I'll be raving and—"

"Easy, Will," soothed Shayne, sprawling his rangy frame into a chair. "She's all yours." He tossed Gentry the slip of paper on which he had noted Kara's new address. "I helped her move."

The detective chief cocked a dubious eye. "And?"

"She's convinced her husband was murdered. But in spite of her occult claims she hasn't the least idea why or by whom, or even how he did the bullet trick." He lit a cigarette. "What gave with Willie Kling?"

Gentry bristled. "Enough to bet your badge that he and Burton Adams—wherever he's hiding—are in on it together."

"Also," said the redhead. "that he's the ugly son who conked me and stole whatever was stolen from Voltane's trunk. What was ballistic's report on the slug I took from his mouth?"

"Nothing. It wasn't marked, it hadn't been fired. Just dug out of the shell."

"It begins to look as if he was killed by the wrong bullet," Shayne said wryly, reaching for the phone. "Mind if I call my office?"

Gentry nodded helplessly as the redhead dialed. Lucy Hamilton answered on the second ring. "Angel, it's me," he said. "Any calls?"

The redhead held the receiver tight against his ear, heard his secretary's voice saying, ". . . Tim Rourke, three times, about Voltane. Something about a big fight he had years ago with somebody called 'Zamboni'—"

Shayne hung up. Gentry's eyes followed him dismally as he strode from the office.

Shayne needed no occult guidance to locate Timothy Rourke. The emaciated reporter was in the usual booth at the usual bar around the corner from the *Daily News* building, ogling an almost empty highball. He looked up owlishly over his glasses as the redhead joined him.

"Our bullet-catching friend," he said by way of greeting, "seems to have been something of a ladies' man, even as you and I. Are you buying?"

Shayne snapped his fingers at the bartender. He ordered a bourbon for Tim, a brandy for himself. "Go on," he said.

Tim glanced at his notes. "It also seems he got into one helluva jam over a former strip-tease artist when he was working the Ottowa State Fair years ago. She was the wife of another performer also playing the fair—a sharpshooter who called himself 'General Zamboni,' and the mother of his baby son. When he found out what was going on between her and Voltane he really sharpshooted. But he was so blind with rage the bullet only nicked his ear. There was a terrible stink about it at the time. Then everything suddenly blew over, and a few months later La Belle Zamboni died following an abortion."

"Forget the drinks," said Shayne, catching the bartender's eye andd tossing a self-explanatory dollar bill on the table. "Come on—we'll go in my car. This is your story, Tim, and you can write it to suit yourself. But if you break as much as one word of it before I give you the green light—!"

Tim followed, his slaty eyes glinting with anticipation.

IT WAS ALMOST as if Zamboni had been expecting him. He was standing in the half open doorway of his beach house when Shayne and Tim pulled up.

"Good afternoon Mr. Shayne. I got in touch with the police as you advised and—"

"That can wait," Shayne said, gesturing toward the reporter. "This is Timothy Rourke, a friend of mine."

Zamboni acknowledged the introduction with mournful eyes, hesitated, and then led them back into the living room. Tim sank into a chair, and Shayne strode to the mantlepiece and studied the face of the smiling lady in the gilt frame. The general was standing directly behind him.

"My wife," he said sadly. "She was very beautiful."

"Very," agreed the redhead. "When did she die, general?"

"Nineteen hundred and thirty-five."

Shayne could see the reflection of Zamboni's face over his own shoulder in the oval mirror above the portrait. "That would make Burton Adams about twenty three now, wouldn't it? He has his mother's eyes, too."

Shayne saw the startled look on Zamboni's face change quickly to one of utter despair. He whirled around. "You're a fool, Zamboni, both of you! How long did you think you could keep your son hidden with practically the whole state of Florida hunting him?"

Zamboni nodded tearfully. "I tried to warn him to go away Mr. Shayne—out of the country fast! But when you are young and in love—" He sighed. "You are a fool anyway. But Kara made him hide here. She told him that everything would soon blow over, and then they could get married. They are crazy about each other. My boy even wanted to run away with her when they first met, but she was too afraid of her husband. Voltane was a cruel, very jealous man."

Zamboni fingered his mustache unhappily, and his voice had a frightened tone. "I lied to you this afternoon, Mr. Shayne. Kara has been here many times with Burt—to bring dishonor to my house."

Shayne cursed himself inwardly for having fallen for Kara's clever pretense. His face hardened, and he went on evenly, "You also lied about not knowing Voltane. I don't say without cause. He was responsible for your wife's death."

Zamboni stiffened. He turned bitterly to the smiling portrait on the mantlepiece. "My boy's mother. It was not her fault! The bullet that killed Voltane—*Zamboni* should have fired it!"

"But his son did," Shayne said. "The vendetta is satisfied. Now where is he? Will he give himself up of his own accord, or will I have to go after him?"

Zamboni crossed himself, then shuffled slowly over to the foot of the stairs by the rifle cabinet. "Bambino," he called, "it's no use. It's like I told you. Come down please, for Papa."

A brief silence, then the sound of reluctant, descending footsteps, and Burton Adams, hollow-eyed but youthful and vigorous in T-shirt and faded dungarees, appeared.

Shayne identified him to Tim Rourke, who had been missing nothing. "Why did you stooge for Voltane last night?" he demanded.

Father and son exchanged furtive looks, then the boy fixed his sullen blue eyes squarely on the detective. He did not reply.

"You didn't do it as a favor to him. You had as much reason to hate him as your father did. Why?"

Silence.

"You'd better talk," Shayne said sharply. "Who was in on it with you? Willie Kling? Your father? Or was it your girl friend, Kara?"

Adams' hands clenched into fists. Shayne pretended not to notice. He lit a cigarette, offered one to the boy. The youth refused, scowling.

Shayne went on quietly, "You're in one hell of a spot, Burt. If there's anything you want to tell me I'm listening."

Burt stood silent, his handsome face inflexible. Shayne waited, then went to the telephone and

dialed Operator. "Miami Police Headquarters—"

But the sudden wail of sirens interrupted the call, and he hung up. The doorbell jangled loudly, persistently, accompanied by the sound of heavy banging on the front door. Shayne dashed out of the room, unbolted the front door and admitted Chief Gentry and two uniformed policemen.

Gently howled. "Good grief! You again? I might have known!"

"I was just phoning you, Will."

"You were in a pig's kinetta! Somebody phoned Headquarters from this town that Burton Adams lives here."

"He's in the back waiting for you," Shayne said cheerfully. "But I'm afraid he's not in a very communicative mood."

When Adams saw the policemen he edged slowly back toward the gun cabinet . . . then dove head foremost toward an open window. He was halfway out when Shayne caught him by the ankles and yanked him back into the room, causing him to land flat on his face with a sharp cry.

Shayne's right arm locked vise-like around young Adams' neck. He hoisted him to his feet and gestured to the officers. They pinioned the youth's arms behind his back, and Gentry moved in close.

"Handcuff him!" he ordered.

Zamboni was clinging to the mantlepiece, staring up at the smiling face of his dead wife. Slowly he took down the frame, removed the picture, and tore it into pieces.

Then he sank into a chair and cradled his head in his arms. His shoulders shook with his sobbing.

VII

THE REDHEAD HURRIED through Lucy Hamilton's specially prepared dinner of sirloin smothered in mushrooms in the cozy warmth of her second floor apartment, then returned with bleary eyes to the carbon copy of her eye-witness account of last night's tragedy.

His rangy body was relaxed, but his mind was racing in high gear. So far, the only provable fact he had to go on was that Voltane had been killed by a bullet marked by Adams' father.

The phone rang. Lucy picked up the receiver. She smiled, then handed it to Shayne. "Tim Rourke. I hardly recognized him. I think he's sober."

The reporter's voice was in such a high pitch of excitement that he didn't have to strain to hear his words: "Mike, I'm calling from headquarters. Zamboni just confessed! He said he murdered Voltane by switching Kara's fake bullet and marking one of his own."

Shayne hung up, frowning, now convinced more than ever that the truth lay in the secret of the trick itself. He had suspected from the

beginning a not so simple substitution of bullets, the bona fide marked one for a dummy that could pass as the real McCoy and that would disintegrate when fired. But where murder was concerned, theory was not enough.

He suddenly recalled that his magician friend, Fred Keating, was opening tonight with Beatrice Lillie at the Playhouse in Coconut Grove. He put in a person-to-person call backstage and told the operator to ring back when she had Keating on the line. Lucy handed him a brandy, and the glass was almost empty when the phone rang and he heard Keating's voice over the receiver.

"Mike, you old Hawkshaw! Don't tell me—you called about Voltane! It's a short intermission, so make it snappy."

Shayne told him how he thought the bullet trick might have been done. Was he on the right track?

"From what I remember of Voltane's version," was the reply, "the principle you've mentioned is probably the one he used."

"Which would mean," Shayne went on, "that after the bullet is marked, it would have to be smuggled off the stage in some way, and the nub extracted from its shell. After that it could be slipped to Voltane to 'palm' in his mouth."

The magician's voice laughed sonorously. "Marvelous, my dear Holmes! And when the dummy is fired he hams it up properly and bares the marked one in his teeth —chord in G major!"

"Thanks, Fred, and best to Miss Lillie."

At least that explained the slug in the dead magician's mouth. The poor fool thought it was the *marked one*.

But it left unexplained who switched, or didn't switch, or *re*-switched, bullets. It could have been Adams, it could have been Kara, it could have been Willie Kling. Even Zamboni's story might just possibly be true.

If he had guessed correctly as to the principle involved, the answer now hinged on the exact manner in which the bullets had been switched. When Adams dropped his own into the plate Voltane had made a big deal out of: "*. . . at no time do I or any of my assistants ever touch—*"

WILLIE KLING was living in a small furnished room with an outside bath in a dank, creaky building a few blocks from Kara's new abode. He did not answer when Shayne first rapped on the door. The third time he opened it a few inches, and snarled, "I'm not in!"

Shayne put his weight on the door and pushed Kling back. The man glared at him. "What the hell do *you* want?" he demanded.

"What you stole from your boss's trunk last night!"

"What you talking about?"

"I'm in a hurry!"

"I didn't take nothing, Shayne."

Shayne looked at him steadily and said, "Get it!"

Kling hesitated, eying the redhead's grim face doubtfully. Then he shrugged and turned to a half-open suitcase lying next to a metal clothes cabinet. It was filled with handcuffs, leg-irons, padlocks, tools and dirty laundry. With insolent deliberation he dug out a greasy, towel-wrapped bundle, and flung it at the detective, his face black with hate.

Shayne picked it up hurriedly, unfolded the towel, and saw—a plate. But the damnedest plate. To the eye it would have passed as one of the common dime store varieties. If it hadn't been for its weight and thickness to the touch he would have thought Willie was pulling a fast one.

Accidentally his right thumb touched something on its outer edge. He started at the sudden vibration in his hands, the simultaneous silent and lightning-like whirl of little trap doors in the center of the plate that could . . . that could have invisibly substituted one small object for another.

Like, for instance—a bullet.

It was now close to midnight, and assembled in Chief Gentry's office were Willie Kling, Adams and his father, under police guard, Kara and Timothy Rourke.

"It's not what the murderer *did* that killed Voltane, Will," Shayne pointed out, "but what the murderer did *not* do. Both Zamboni and Adams thought each other guilty, and Zamboni made a phony confession to save his son's life."

Gentry bit into a soggy black cigar butt, rumbled, "What makes you so sure it was phony?"

"Because of the way the trick worked, Will. The real bullet is marked first, *then* switched for the dummy. Obviously he lied when he told you Kara handed him the dummy to mark."

Comprehension dawned on Gentry's grim, keenly alert face. "Then Voltane was murdered by someone deliberately *not* making the switch!"

Shayne nodded, but before he had a chance to speak Kara was on her feet with a shrill cry. "That's ridiculous! No one touched—"

"Right, Kara!" grinned Shayne, "Not with their hands! But this—" he whipped out the mechanical plate from under his coat, and his face hardened as he strode up to her, tripping the secret spring with his thumb. *"This* is the weapon you used to murder your husband so that you could marry your lover!"

Burton Adams, his handsome face twisted with horror, sprang to her side, drew her close, and choked, "No! She wouldn't. It must have been a mistake!"

Gentry shouted for order, and Shayne said harshly to Kara, "Go on, tell him the truth! Tell him

how you staged your alibi in my office yesterday morning with your slick mumbo-jumbo! Tell him how you fooled Dr. Vogle with your fake side-show trance, and how you even tried to frame his own father when you saw I was getting wise!"

Kara seemed suddenly to age. Her lips quivered and her whole body sagged. She looked despairfully into Adams' dazed, tear-filled eyes, and her own told him that what Michael Shayne had just said was true.

Adams turned his face as she was led away. The redhead laid a fatherly hand on his shoulder. "Sorry, Burt, but that's my job. It isn't always pleasant."

The boy blew his nose, looked up at him and gulped. "Mr. Shayne, do you think—could you get Chief Gentry to call off his charges against me? You know, resisting arrest, running away from a crime? I wouldn't ask, only I've—I've got a very special reason."

"Could be. What's the reason?"

"I'd like to join the Marines, sir."

MIKE SHAYNE PRESENTS

Next Month's Headliners

DEATH CREEPS SLOWLY by BRETT HALLIDAY

The New Mike Shayne Complete Novelet

•

DEAD WRONG by FRANK KANE

A New Johnny Liddell Novelet

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THE FRIGHTENED LADY by THEODORE MATHIESON

A New Jim Troy Thrilling Novelet

Scratch One Mark

The killer's gambling session frameup seemed perfect. Only. . .it wasn't.

by DAN J. MARLOWE

THE BIG BLOND man had already turned the key in the lock of his desk drawer when the door to his office burst open unceremoniously and his unannounced visitor dropped down in the chair across from him. The blond man's light-colored eyes narrowed slightly, but his lips curved in what could have been a smile.

"Yes, Ted?" he said softly. He leaned back in his swivel chair and folded his hands gently in his lap.

Ted Lindsay sat sprawled in the opposite chair, a small, dark, intense-looking man of thirty-odd with small, dark, intense eyes behind rimless glasses. He turned his

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head to read aloud in a deliberate tone the reversed black lettering on the door. "Lieutenant Joseph Conway." The thin mouth drew down sardonically at the corners. "How's the youngest police lieutenant in the state today, Joe?"

"Just fine," the big man said easily. He had gone to school with Ted Lindsay, whose casual attitude was no novelty to him. He wondered if Ted had ever realized just how close he had come once or twice to discovering that he had been taking a little too much for granted. "Someone you'd like arrested?"

"I might, at that," Ted Lindsay said as if the idea had just occurred to him. "On the other hand, I might not." He leveled a finger across the desk, the dark eyes mocking. "Has Dave Corbin been asked to step aside yet, so that you can be the youngest police *captain* in the state?"

"Dave'll be around a while, Ted."

"If he is, it'll be in spite of you," the slender man said. He grinned crookedly. "I know you, boy. You're ambitious."

Lieutenant Joseph Conway considered the man across the desk. "I know you, too, Ted—fortunately for you. I know that eight years ago you took over a patchwork, hand-me-down hardware store from your father, and that it's now the largest in the area. I know that you play the tightest game of draw poker in a hundred square mile radius. Do I really need to know anything more about you?" He smiled. "You haven't said whom you wanted arrested."

Ted Lindsay scowled. "That's what I like about small towns. You and I are friends, which doesn't necessarily mean that we like each other." He straightened abruptly in his chair. "You coming by the game tonight?"

"I'm speaking to a group at the Boys' Club at ten."

The crooked grin returned. "Still politicking, Joe?"

"I wasn't elected to this chair."

"That's right," Ted Lindsay agreed promptly. "A little afraid of the electorate, perhaps? Or possibly it's easier to do a little sub rosa campaigning for the people who can appoint a deserving young man to a suitable office?" He waited for a response, and when none was forthcoming he continued. "Haven't seen you much at the game lately. Turned your back on it?"

"I've been a little busy."

"I wonder." The intense dark eyes explored the big man speculatively. "Could it be that the youngest police lieutenant in the state now feels it a little bit indiscretionary to be a regular in the town's high stakes poker game?" Syrup dripped from every syllable. "I'd gotten into the habit of thinking that that game had been pretty good to you."

"I don't think I'd disagree, Ted."

"I don't mean just financially, understand. I remember when Big Joe Conway was a raggedy-pants kid fresh out of school playing in a game he couldn't afford because some of the better people in town played in it too. Like Doc Morrissey. And Judge Schofield. You going to marry Ann Schofield, Joe? She put the seal of approval yet on your Nordic chromosomes?"

The blond man glanced up at the wall clock, elaborately. "You're going to make me late for dinner."

"At Judge Schofield's?" Ted inquired, and waved a hand negligently. "Don't let me detain you."

"You must have had a reason for coming by the office."

"It'll keep. Never let it be said that ol' Ted diverted a man from his star-guided purpose in life."

"One more time, Ted. Why are you here?"

"I asked you if you were coming by the game tonight."

"You did. There's a reason I should come by?"

"There, now," the slender man said approvingly. "The bright young police official doesn't need to be hit in the head more than four or five times, does he?"

Lindsay stretched lazily in his chair, and then removed a small brown notebook from his shirt pocket. The man behind the desk had seen the notebook before. Like the natural-born figure filbert that he was, Ted kept book upon the winnings and losings of everyone who sat in on the town's weekly poker game. An estimate of his own winnings for a given period some time back had been so remarkably close to the fact that the man behind the desk had determined never to underestimate Ted Lindsay.

"I thought you might like to come by, Joe, and take a lesson from a man who, in the last—" Ted Lindsay glanced down at the notebook in his hand "—eleven sessions has won seventeen thousand dollars."

"Thousand?—" The big man was halfway out of his chair.

"Thousand. Cheerful winner, too."

"If you're serious, Ted, who in the star-spangled hell is losing that kind of money? What kind of limit are you maniacs playing? Are you all crazy completely? This town can't stand that kind of noise."

"Oh, it's not such a noisy process."

"Was it you, Ted?"

"Sad to relate, it was not, Joey. In the same eleven sessions I was relieved of three hundred eighteen iron men. Previously won, of course."

"Who dropped the bundle, then? No one around here could afford seventeen hundred."

"Don't get shook, Lieutenant. The bank's still safe. You've been a little out of touch. There's a few

new faces in the game since you've been around. Real estate man from Chesterbrook. I've got him down for four. And a wild man from downstate—a dairyman. He's in for seventy-five hundred if he's in for a quarter." Ted Lindsay closed the notebook with a snap. "And then there's Austin Schofield."

"Austin Schofield?" the blond man said sharply. "Judge Schofield's nephew?"

"You know any other Austin Schofields?" the slender man asked with burlesque solemnity.

"Let's have it, Ted."

"Sure. I've got him down for three."

"Three? Three thousand?" The chair squeaked as the big man left it, his voice thickened in its vehemence. "You're crazy. That kid never had three hundred, even, of his own in his damn life."

"Nevertheless." Ted Lindsay waved the notebook. "Chapter and verse. Three thousand."

"Does the Judge know? Who let him in the game anyhow, Ted? A kid like that in with you pirates."

"Now pull up on the reins a minute, Joe," Ted Lindsay said. "Who comes to the game with better qualifications? I tell you the first night he showed Bart and Doc and a couple more of us shook his hand and made him more than welcome. That game's been played practically every Tuesday night for the last twenty-five years, come drought or blizzard. His father played in the game, and his uncle played in it. Until the Judge dropped out recently it wasn't very often there wasn't a Schofield sitting in."

"Sure, but a Schofield who knew what he was doing! That milksop, pansy kid—! And that kind of money being won and lost; the game's gotten out of hand. I remember when if a man threw a check into a pot everyone there knew just about how much it overdrew him."

Ted Lindsay grinned. "Remember the Wednesday morning scrounging sessions to get those overdrafts covered?"

"I remember that a man could make four twenty-five dollar touches around the square and straighten himself out. That was when it was a sensible game. I'm going to put a stop to this foolishness. I asked you before—does the Judge know?"

"I just told you the Judge dropped out some time back. If no one told you, who do you think told him?"

Lindsay sat with his head cocked to one side as though testing the sound of what he had just heard. "Just what did you mean, you're going to put a stop to this foolishness, Joe?"

"What I said." The big man bit off the words.

"Yes? How?"

"If I have to, by padlocking Bart Chisolm's warehouse."

"You're not getting a little too big for your britches, are you, boy? Bart Chisolm can throw his weight around in this town. And that game in his warehouse is an institution."

"Can the institution stand the echoes from a half-wired-up kid putting three thousand stolen dollars into it?"

"Stolen?"

"Oh, come off it, Ted! You think he dug it out of the ground? You know he's been clerking in the Judge's office this summer. He must have—" A balled fist slammed the desk top with such force a glass paperweight jumped into the air. "Dammit, Ted, why didn't you come to me before?"

"That's not the question I thought you'd ask me, Joey," Ted Lindsay said softly. He slid down in his chair, face inscrutable. "I realize you're a little touchy where the name Schofield is concerned. But I really expected you'd ask me why I came to you now."

The silence built up between them for sixty seconds before the man behind the desk spoke again. "There's a big winner? One big winner?"

"There is a big winner. Seventeen thousand dollars worth. Charlie Ballou."

"That bushelfoot won seventeen thousand?"

Ted frowned. "I'm in the somewhat painful process of revising my previous estimate of ol' bushelfoot Charlie."

"You mean you think he's doing something?"

"No." Ted Lindsay said it slowly, as though he were tasting the sound of the word. "I don't think he's doing anything, because I've been watching him. And I do mean watching. Seemed like kind of a bad joke at first, as poor a card player as Charlie winning so consistently. So help me, if I played poker like Charlie I'd take up praying for a better world. Still, when the money steadily gravitates in the same direction, you kind of put the glass on it. There are a couple of little things.

"I've been paying more attention to his game lately than I have my own, and I think he *knows* something. It's almost uncanny the way he pours the coal on when he's top hand. Last week I kept track: all night long he never called once on a hand he won. The losers called him every time. That's confidence. Or something."

"He's back-reading them?"

"If he is. I'd like to know how. I've taken home at least two dozen decks of cards out of that game, and I've tested them with calipers, ultra-violet light, acid, and transparencies. If they're marked, it's quite a job."

"Seventeen thousand would buy quite a job."

"They're not marked, Joe."

"So how is he doing it, Ted?"

"When I find out, I'll be glad to let you know."

"But you're sure he's doing it?"

Ted Lindsay's hesitation was fractional. "He's got to be."

"It may be a little late, but I'll be by tonight."

Aroused curiosity was in the slender man's voice. "Don't tell me ol' Sherlock discovered the method that quick?"

"No. I'll play it by ear. See you tonight."

Ted Lindsay struggled a moment against the abrupt dismissal, then rose reluctantly to his feet. He started to say something, changed his mind, nodded, and turned to the door.

The man behind the desk looked after his departed figure for a moment, glanced up at the clock, and stood up purposefully. His glance rested for an instant on the reversed black lettering on the door upon which Ted Lindsay had commented so jibingly: *Lieutenant Joseph Conway*. A long, long way removed from Big Joe Conway. A long, hard way removed.

Lieutenant Joseph Conway ran lightly down the back steps of the police station, and slid under the wheel of his car in the parking lot. He drove rapidly out Main Street to Maple, where he turned right and parked four doors beyond the rear entrance of the Ellis Hotel.

There were no elevators at the rear of the Ellis, so that entrance was rarely used. Lieutenant Conway walked up four flights of steps without passing anyone, and knocked on the door of 417.

"Who is it?" The voice was muffled through the door.

"Conway." He looked hard at the wiry, dark-skinned man who opened the door. "What are you doing here, Max? You know you and Charlie can't risk being seen together."

"Nobody's seen us together," Charlie Ballou said from the bed where he was stretched out in stockinged feet. "I just got tired of sitting here popping my bubblegum and invited Max up for a drink. What's yours?"

"Some other time."

"Business?" Charlie Ballou asked alertly. He removed his fat hands from behind his head and sat up on the edge of the bed—a short, pudgy individual with a round, cheerful face and thinning hair. He stretched mightily, smothering a yawn, and glanced at Max Hawkins hovered over the complicated game of solitaire spread out on the coffee table while the delicate looking hands idly riffled an extra deck of cards.

"Always glad to cooperate with the Law, Lieutenant," Charlie Ballou said lightly, slipping his feet into unlaced shoes as he shuffled to the bureau and ran a comb through his tousled hair. In the

glass his glance probed thoughtfully at his visitor, but his face when he turned was as bland as a bowl of jello. "Trouble? A beef on the game?"

"You might call it that. Ted Lindsay's a little itchy. He's watching you. He thinks you're backreading them."

"Just me he's watching? Not Max?"

"Not Max."

Charlie Ballou tugged gently at a plump earlobe. "Anything specific?"

"In particular he's noticed the way you ride hell out of your winning hands. He's got an adding machine for a mind; don't underestimate him."

"Just so he doesn't take to noticing who's dealing eighty percent of those winning hands—"

Charlie Ballou looked over at Max at the coffee table. "Nothing fatal, I'd say. I've been careless; pushing a little hard. We'll throw Lindsay a few bones for a couple of weeks, Max. Nothing's bothering him that a couple of winning nights won't make him forget all about."

Max Hawkins nodded, the dark face serious, the long, prehensile fingers flicking a rainbow of cards from hand to hand.

Charlie Ballou turned back to his visitor. "That's the kind of information that makes your weekly envelope a good investment, young fella."

"There's a little bit more, Charlie."

The stout man's eyes narrowed. "Like what?"

"Like Austin Schofield."

The fat lips pursed comically. "Mama's boy?"

"The same. I should have been paying closer attention to the game, Charlie. Austin's off-limits."

"Now just how do you figure that, Lieutenant?" Charlie Ballou sounded genuinely curious.

"I'll give it to you quick. I'll be living in this town for the rest of my life, and I've got plans for it. Austin Schofield is Judge Schofield's nephew, and I happen to be marrying Judge Schofield's daughter. The Judge has done a lot for me, and my plans include his doing a lot more. That answer you?"

"Partly," the round-faced man replied easily. "So you're building your fences around this pasture. Well, I still don't see how it's supposed to affect our arrangement."

"Don't go stupid on me, Charlie. I just told you. The kid is off-limits. You've hooked him for five grand."

"That sounds a little steep." Charlie looked over at the listening Max, who shrugged noncommittally. "So I wouldn't argue over a few dollars, if you say it's five. But so what?"

"It's stolen money."

"I couldn't care less, Lieutenant. I have no trouble at all in spending it."

"I'll take it, Charlie. Right now."

"You'll take it." The tone was expressionless. "Just like that, you'll take it."

"Not like that. Like this." Charlie Ballou retreated an instinctive half-step at the swift appearance of the dark-muzzled .38 from the shoulder holster beneath the big man's jacket. "If necessary."

The revolver hovered negligently equidistant between Charlie and Max. "I know about the derringer in your sleeve holster, Max," Conway said. "Don't get careless."

The stout man strove to sound amused. "You can't stand that kind of noise, boy. Any more than we can. Relax. You're among friends. What makes you so hairy?"

"I played that record for you. Now get me five thousand dollars."

"So you can play big shot? I'm afraid not." He said it mildly. "Your position's a little weak, Lieutenant. You brought us into this game and turned us loose in return for a hundred fifty bucks in a plain white envelope every Wednesday morning. I bought the deal with no fences around anyone. It goes as it lays."

"Circumstances alter cases, Charlie."

"Not with me they don't."

Conway took two quick steps forward, reversing the gun in his hand as he did so. Charlie Ballou flinched, but not quickly enough. The gun butt sank three quarters of an inch deep in the muscle of his right forearm, and the stout man yelped and fell over on the bed, white-faced. He stared up in panic at the man who bent over him, then half-straightened to keep an eye on the motionless Max.

Conway's voice was vibrant. "You seem to be a little slow today, Charlie; I told you this was important to me. Let me tell you just how important, and I'm only going to tell you once. You make your living with that harmlessly foolish middleaged-child's face of yours. In sixty seconds I'm going to work you over with this gun butt until you haven't a face left. I'll break your jaw in enough places so that it'll be six weeks before you talk to anyone about it. Unless you get me five thousand dollars, and I mean right now."

"Bureau . . . drawer!" Charlie Ballou managed to get out, and watched Conway sidle to the bureau, placing his feet as carefully as a ballet dancer.

He removed a bulging brown envelope from the top drawer, and tossed it on the coffee table in front of Max, disrupting the solitaire game. "Count. Fast."

The slim fingers rippled through the sheaf of bills, and silently pushed a third of the stack across the table. Charlie Ballou was sitting up on the bed, holding onto his arm, his face pasty as he watched the big man stuff the bulky package in his inside jacket

pocket. The stout man ran the tip of his tongue over livid lips; his voice was hoarse. "You play rough, kid."

"I don't play."

Ballou tried to smile. "You sold me. Our deal still go on the game?"

"Why not? I'll see that young Schofield's not there to tempt you."

"Business is business, huh?" The smile this time was more of a success, but Charlie winced when he tried to move his arm.

"There is one other thing," Conway said thoughtfully. He approached the coffee table. "Don't let Charlie talk you into anything foolish, Max. Because if he should, and I get one crack at you, you'll never forget it. Is that perfectly clear?"

He looked down at the sallow lace and the slim, long-fingered hands. "I'll put both your hands together, and I'll empty every chamber in this gun right through both of them. After that you can try dealing cards the rest of your life with a pair of hooked claws."

Charlie Ballou had a touch of color back in his face. Now he tried to put a little jauntiness into his tone. "I still don't see why you're pawing the ground. A mark is a mark. Right?"

"Wrong. You're not *that* stupid, Charlie. You knew who he was, and you knew my connections. You just didn't give a damn. I'd advise you to think it over the next time you feel like gambling with my prospects."

He looked back from the door; neither Charlie nor Max had changed position. On the stairs he separated the wad of bills into two sections, and restored the slightly larger one to the inside breast pocket. His mind was busy as he ran down the balance of the stairs. Eighteen months ago it had been a good idea to import those two upstairs into the game, but eighteen months ago he hadn't known he could marry Ann Schofield. Now they represented a hazard, at the very least a potential blackmail threat.

Lieutenant Conway settled his big body behind the wheel of his car, rested his hands lightly on the steering wheel, and considered the possibilities. It didn't take him long to make up his mind. From his years of poker playing a maxim subconsciously filtered into the forefront of his thoughts: when you make a move, make it a strong one. Charlie and Max called for a strong move.

He started the car and drove over to Chisolm's Hay and Grain Company. The front was dark, but he rapped on the glass panel in the door with his ring until old Bart's bald head appeared behind the glass.

"Afraid you was a customer, Joe," the old man told him as he stood aside to let him in. "I don't aim to keep this place open day

-an' night, too." He led the way to the rear of the dusty smelling store, a wide-set, slow-moving man.

Lieutenant Conway sat down in the chair Bart Chisolm pulled out for him and looked around the little office littered with cracked dishes of seed samples and half empty grain bags. His host seated himself ponderously at the old-fashioned rolltop desk, settled a pair of battered spectacles on his highbridged nose. and swivelled in his chair to look over the top of them.

"Social visit, Joe?" Chisolm asked.

"Not exactly. I hear the game's gone a little frantic."

The old man smiled. "Shouldn't wonder but what you're right. Boys will be boys. Been six, eight weeks since I've sat in myself; got a little too rich for my tired old blood. I've had it in mind to drop around and talk it over with Dave, but you know how it is. You keep puttin' it off—"

"Talk it over with Dave Corbin? Why?"

Bart Chisolm smiled his slow, easy smile. "You young fellas tend to think nothin's ever happened in this world if it hasn't happened to you personal. Now I mind the time fourteen, fifteen years ago that the reg'lars in the game was crowded out by a passel of high-rollers drifted in from all around this end of the state. I talked it over with Dave Corbin that time. He raided the game."

"*Raided* it!"

Bart's eyes twinkled behind the spectacles. "Before your time, I guess. Your poker playin' time, anyway. Just seemed to happen, somehow, that the night Dave broke in an' collared 'em all upstairs warn't no one in the game but highrollers. All the locals was to home beatin' their wives, I reckon. Dave took 'em all in, charged 'em with bein' present, fined 'em ten dollars apiece, and turned 'em loose. Kind of broke up the game, it did. Couple of months later a few of us regulars started it up again."

Lieutenant Joseph Conway sat in the dingy office with a hundred watt bulb coming on in his mind. *Thank you, Bart,* he thought. *That makes it so simple. So beautifully simple.* He cleared his throat. "I have a feeling you're going to be raided tonight, Bart."

The old man nodded solemnly. "Clear the air a mite, I shouldn't wonder. I'll make a few phone calls. Don't believe there's anyone I'll talk to that'll need to get dusted off by the mule if they know his heels are cocked."

He frowned. "'Cept Ted Lindsay, maybe. He's set in his ways. Susie Goddard, used to teach you boys in high school, always said Ted tended to scatter a bit in his thinking, but then of course Susie never saw him at a card table.

Kind of a needler, too. Really likes to lift up in the saddle to put a little weight on the spurs when he can see 'em diggin' in. But a real good poker player, that boy. Almost as good as you, Joe."

"Thanks, Bart. Don't call Ted. Let him come. He'll make it look better, and I'll see to it that he gets away in the scuffle." *I should have a local witness present when I kill Charlie and Max,* Lieutenant Conway thought; *Ted would do nicely.*

He drove home in the twilight's heat, showered, and changed. The shoulder holster's bulge under the white linen suit was scarcely noticeable in the mirror, and he hurried out to his car again. He was late.

Judge Schofield was sitting on the wide veranda when Conway drove up, his frail figure dwarfed by the big chair. Conway never headed his car into the spacious grounds at the rim of the graveled driveway without thinking that one day all this would be Ann's, and that what was Ann's would very soon be his. A very human feeling, he felt.

The judge raised the glass in his hand as the big man lithely ascended the steps. Under the mane of white hair the seamed, parchmented face had a yellowed look. "Evening, Joe. Join me?"

"Thanks. If you have a moment after dinner, sir—?"

"Surely. Don't let me forget."

Dinner, as always, Conway thought, was a testimonial to the judge's taste no less than to his pocketbook. Ann sat directly opposite him, complaisantly agreeable in her absent-minded way. Not for the first time he wondered what really went on within that pale, cool looking envelope.

He had a feeling at times that she might qualify as a truly passionless woman. Not that it mattered. A few miles away he had a quiet little arrangement that was anything but passionless, and Ann or no Ann, he saw no necessity for disturbing it. Before or after marriage, for that matter.

In the library afterward he accepted one of the Judge's slim panatellas, and when the Judge had stiff-jointedly lowered himself into his wing chair handed him three thousand dollars of Charlie's money, and a quick rundown.

The old man listened impassively, but the lined features were drawn and tired long before the finish. His voice was a rasp, a faint echo of the man he had been. "I appreciate this, Joe. Evidently it's not only the cuckolded husband who's the last to hear things. I had no idea . . . the boy has the combination to the office safe, of course—" He tapped the bills thoughtfully on the arm of his chair. "How the devil did you manage to recover this?"

"Let's say I knew which way to lean, sir."

"Evidently," the Judge said

drily. "It's not the first time you've impressed me with the force and vigor with which you attack a problem."

The tired eyes stared unseeingly at the panelled bookcases a moment before refocusing. "I especially appreciate your giving me the opportunity to handle this myself, Joe. Austin is a little . . . unstable. I feel responsible for him. My brother—" He exhaled a cloud of light blue smoke impatiently. "Lame ducks. The world is full of lame ducks. I'll have a talk with you presently about Austin. Not tonight."

"We'll housebreak him, Judge."

The lined face was unsmiling. "We'll do exactly that. You're a strong shoulder, Joe. I seem to need one lately."

"I'm speaking downtown tonight, sir, so if you'll excuse me—"

The Judge nodded, and Conway left the library with the aging man seated in his huge chair and staring out across the big, high-ceilinged room. He made his goodnight to Ann at the coffee table on the veranda; unquestioningly she held up her face to be kissed. Cool. Cool and untouched. Unemotional? He couldn't decide. Some day he would make an impression upon this girl stranger to whom he was engaged, and she would stop this business of looking right through him . . .

On the way downtown he stopped at Jim Browning's, and walked around to the back of the house. Jim himself answered the door, his lean features questioning. "Have to roust you out a little later tonight, Jim."

He nodded, unperturbed. "Someone cookin' a little mash? Will I need boots?"

"No boots. It's in town. We're raiding the game."

His head went back as if he'd been hit. "The game? Hell, Joe—"

"Dave will call you, Jim. This is a special." Jim Browning was Dave Corbin's man. Conway mused as he walked back out to his car. He needed Dave's man to testify to what happened to Charlie and Max. When it happened.

He drove to Dave Corbin's, and found him and his wife seated on their front porch in the late dusk that was nearly darkness. Doris Corbin knowingly excused herself after a moment so that they could talk.

The weatherbeaten police captain listened carefully, a hand absently rubbing his long, bristled jawline, lank grey hair standing up all over his head. He nodded finally. "Shame, in a way. Still, 'pears like it's the thing to do. Little coolin' off period will be no bad thing all around. Thing seems to go in cycles. You say Bart's taking care of everything?"

"Yes. I thought I'd take Jim along with me. I just came from

there. He's a little nervous; I told him you'd call him."

Dave Corbin smiled. "Jim's a good man. I'll call him. You need me for anything?"

"I'll probably need you to play magistrate later."

"I'll hunt up my gavel, and blow the dust off it."

All cleared with Captain Corbin, he thought on the way down to the Boys' Club. Keep the old man posted, so that when the push comes he'll never suspect the direction. Or suspect it too late. Dave Corbin was more nearly ready to retire than he knew.

Lieutenant Conway made his speech at ten thirty, and was held up afterward only long enough to have a drink with First Selectman Mike Winn in the locker room. He drove back to Jim Browning's, and pulled into the driveway. The kitchen light went out at the sound of the tires on the gravel, and Jim crossed the damp grass from his back door and climbed into the car.

"Dave explain it to you?" Conway asked.

"Yeah." It was an embarrassed mumble. "I was afraid you were playin' a little politics, or—"

"Ted Lindsay's in the game, for bait," Conway said, cutting him short. "I'll send him down first. You see to it that he gets away from you. We'll take in the rest."

Conway could see it all very clearly. They would walk down one at a time until only two were left. Charlie and Max. Charlie and Max would be carried down. Max's sleeve derringer was all the excuse needed, and there would be no one to deny the raiding officer's version of what had happened.

He parked the car in the shadows at the rear of the big warehouse, and found that he was in a hurry to get it accomplised. "This won't take long, Jim."

Jim Browning nodded, slid out, and took up his station beside the warehouse door. Conway took out his key—every regular in the game had his own key to the loft entrance of Bart Chisholm's warehouse—and opened the heavy outer door. On the stairs in the dim light of the naked bulb he removed his jacket and laid it over a projecting beam. He wanted nothing like his pistol snagging on a lapel when he went for it. On second thought he drew it and carried it loosely in his hand as he ascended the stairs.

He could hear the low murmur of voices behind the upstairs door. and knowing that it was never locked, he kicked it open with a bang and walked in on them, fast. "All right, everybody—hold it!"

For an instant heads, arms, and bodies froze grotesquely around the green baize of the table top. He quickly focused on Max at the far end of the table; Max was

the one with the derringer, and the animal instinct that might tip him off as to the reason for the raid.

Conway moved a long stride closer to the table, never taking his eyes from the motionless Max. He could hear Ted Lindsay's unbelieving "What the hell!—" and above it, a sharp, staccato voice that barked "Stickup!"

His ears filled suddenly with the room-contained explosion of a pistol shot, and a jarring slam in the chest that came from nowhere staggered him backward. His frontward recoil dropped him to his knees. For a stupefied instant he thought that he pulled his own trigger by mistake, and that his gun had somehow burst.

He struggled to get up; in the wavering light he could see a red-faced man at the card table with a smoking pistol still extended. A couple of seconds and a whole eternity too late he realized it was Ted Lindsay's wild dairyman from downstate, and that Max's derringer had not been the only gun in the game.

He couldn't get off his knees. His eyes were fogging over; he shook his head, trying to clear them. There was something he *had* to see. From a long way off he could hear Ted Lindsay's voice, panic stricken: "You fool—he's a cop! Didn't you tumble to that?"

"*Cop?* Good God! I thought it was a heist!"

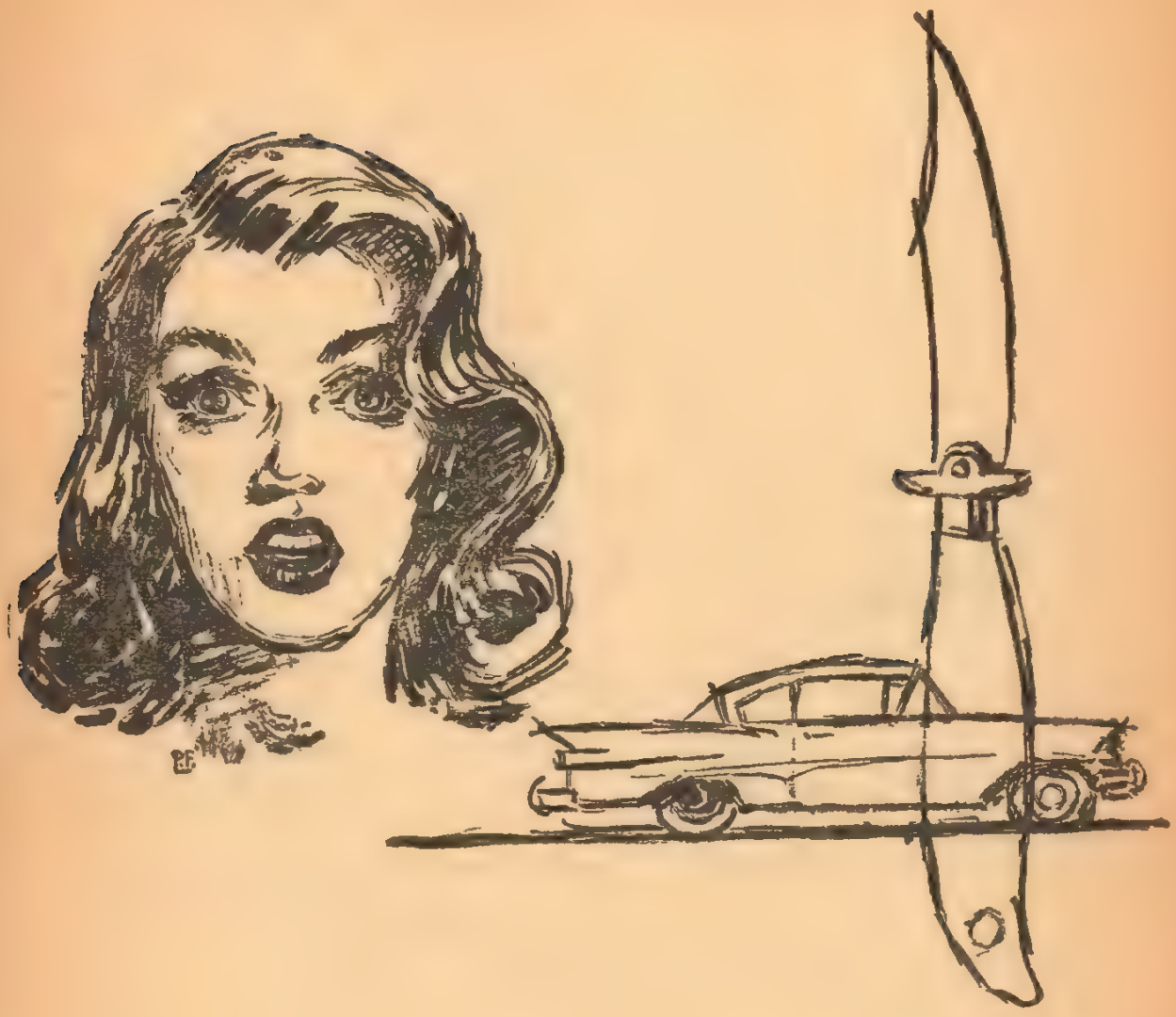
By an effort that strained his blurring vision the man on the floor separated Charlie Ballou's face from the circle of pale faces staring down at him. The round, childish features wore a sort of half-leer that could have been a triumphant grin; as though absent-mindedly he rubbed the arm which had been pistol-whipped, and the man on his knees knew that Charlie Ballou was answering his question for him: Charlie was the man who had yelled "Stickup!"

Desperately Conway tried to raise his arm. With all his might he willed his arm to raise and the revolver to level, but it was terribly heavy. The room spun dizzily, and his head dropped.

With disinterest he noticed the bright red bubbles on his clean white shirtfront. He was so tired . . . so awfully tired. And it was getting dark . . . dark.

The blond head flew up and back as final realization dawned. Galvanically the heavy body lurched upward in a final convulsive lunge, and then fell onto its back with a crash that shook the room, and the staring eyes reflected glassily the light they could no longer see.

Neighborliness in Suburbia may have its advantages . . . when crime comes knocking.



by C. B. GILFORD

THE DEFENDERS

NEITHER Kit nor Tony Foster noticed the strange car that morning. They had no reason to pay any particular attention to it. It was parked way up at the corner, five houses away. And they certainly didn't notice, at that distance, that a man was sitting in it. Besides, they were concentrating on each other.

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Kit went as far as the front stoop with her husband. It was a summer morning, already warm, and she wore only a halter and shorts, the customary "uniform" for the subdivision's matrons.

She gave Tony another small peck out there in the broad daylight. It was not at all like the more passionate farewell embrace they'd had indoors. But she loved him very much, and wanted to kiss him at every opportunity.

"I hate to leave you alone all day," Tony said, still holding her hand.

She knew what he meant. A husband for less than a year, he begrudged every moment he had to spend away from her. So from that point of view she liked to hear him say it. But he also meant that he worried about her—here alone in this new little subdivision house. And that, of course, was ridiculous. She might be separated from him, but she certainly wasn't alone. In fact, the total absence of solitude was her principal complaint.

But she didn't tell him so. She wanted him to think that her happiness in her new home was complete, perfect. "Don't be silly, darling," she said. "I've been getting along fine."

"Well, I like that," he said, putting on a wry face. "I want you to miss me."

That gave her an excuse for another tiny kiss. "I'll try to think of you every once in a while," she promised, and pushed him laughingly away.

She lingered there on the stoop while he walked to the car port and climbed into the car. She watched him back their four-year old sedan down the drive, then waved at him as he turned and headed up the street. Neither of them, however, noticed the strange car as he passed it. They still had no reason to.

When Tony's car was out of sight, Kit went quickly back into the house again. There was so much to do, and she wanted to get an early start. It took so much work to get really settled in a new house. There were the drapes, and that furniture to re-finish—she could list a hundred things.

The thought that her hair needed attention, too, stopped her as she passed the hall mirror. She ran her fingers through it. It was getting straggly, which meant a trip to the beauty shop, and she didn't have time for that these days.

Wait a minute, Mrs. Foster, she chided the image in the mirror. You've got a husband to keep interested, you know. Interested not just in his home, but in you too. She surveyed herself more closely in the mirror. Oh, you're all right, Kit, she thought. The hair is dark and glossy, even if it is a bit straggly. Your eyes are still blue—Tony likes blue-eyed gals—and you've still got the kind of pert little nose that is Tony's favorite kind of nose.

And although you've been working hard on the house and eating too much at noontime, you've still got your figure.

The halter and shorts were such that any figure-fault would have been immediately apparent. She backed up a little for a better look. No faults. No bulges around the bare midriff. Hips slim. Well, she didn't spend much time sitting down, she remembered.

Like any attractive woman, she would have been content to spend more time at the mirror, but the breakfast dishes beckoned. She went into the kitchen, tied an apron around her waist, and started on them.

At least Naomi Simpson wouldn't interrupt her dishwashing this morning. It was a happy thought, but slightly disturbing, too. She still had the nagging, uncertain feeling that she hadn't done the right thing about Naomi. But then —what else *could* she have done?

What it all boiled down to was that she hadn't been quite prepared for life in a subdivision. Their apartment in the staid old neighborhood had been so different. Besides, she'd still had her secretary job then and they'd led very private lives, Tony and she. And it was awfully hard to live a private life in a subdivision.

Naomi made it especially hard. As soon as her own husband left in the morning, as soon as she was sure Tony had left too—slipping over for that second cup of coffee. And sometimes a third and fourth cup. And discussing all of her business, including even her very personal relationsips with her husband. And expecting similar confidences in return. Well she, Kit, had too much work to do to waste time that way. Besides, she had no intention of broadcasting her personal life to the neighborhood.

Of course, that hadn't been the whole of it—just those early morning visits from Naomi. All the women were like Naomi. Their little subdivision was an isolated sixteen-house community in a completely new, still rural area, and all the other fifteen women had their hearts set on living together like one big happy family. There were the afternoon sessions too—sunbathing on the lawns, drinking cokes and talking about husbands and babies. All very uninteresting to Kit, and all very time-wasting. She didn't have any babies yet, and she didn't want to talk about her husband with other women.

So she'd finally had it out with Naomi. With Naomi only—because Naomi was the principal offender as far as she was concerned, and had taken such an extra special interest in her. It had been quite a little scene—two days ago—and she still hadn't had the nerve to tell Tony.

"I don't have an hour to waste every morning," she'd said, "and I don't want to be part of the after-

noon sewing circle either. Just because we happen to live close to each other doesn't mean we have the same interests, you know. I just want to be left alone."

She'd been so wrought up about it that she'd gotten kind of nasty, and said things she'd never really meant to say. So she really had no right to blame Naomi for getting mad.

"That suits me!" Naomi had flung back. "I guess I know when I've been insulted! I guess I know when I'm not wanted!"

Naomi had stormed out then, and the morning visits had stopped. Which was good, which was exactly what Kit had wanted. Except that she would have preferred to have accomplished it in a nicer way. She had abandoned the afternoon group too, and she was quite sure that indignation against her was pretty general. But anyway, she'd had a lot more time to herself in the past two days—and done a lot of things to make their new little ranch home cozier and more liveable . . .

When she heard the sound at the front door she thought at first that it must be Naomi. But it wasn't a knock, and Naomi always knocked at least. One of the kids perhaps. Some of them weren't too well-behaved. They'd been known to walk into people's houses just as if they were running in and out of their own homes.

She left the water running, and started to dry her hands on her apron as she left the kitchen. She was all the way into the living room when she saw the man.

She wasn't afraid in that first second—only surprised. He was standing just inside the front door, gazing around the room. It occurred to her for an instant that maybe he'd intended to enter some other house, and—because the houses looked so much alike—had gotten into this one by mistake. He seemed young, about twenty or so, and rather small. He wore a white T-shirt and dark-colored trousers. His expression was vacant, and innocent of guile.

But it started to change the moment she entered, and he turned to face her. His eyes were very pale, and as soon as they focused on her they seemed to get larger, and to roam over her with frank admiration.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

He looked her straight in the eye and smiled. Then, for an answer, and without saying a word, he reached out behind him and swung the door shut.

"I'll scream," she told him. "All the windows are open and everybody in the neighborhood can hear me."

Fear was somewhere in the back of her mind now, but still not pressing. He was small, almost frail looking and she was sure that

in a struggle she could more than protect herself.

His smile faded. With a smooth, unhurried gesture, he reached behind him again—to his belt, she thought—and brought out a switch blade knife.

"I'll kill you," he said, "if you make any noise."

Now finally—a few seconds too late perhaps—she was afraid. She knew what kind of man this was, she knew what he wanted, she knew that she was not bigger than he was. Worst of all, she knew that he was quite capable of killing her if she resisted.

Yet despite her sudden and complete fear, she refused to succumb to panic. She did not know exactly what to do, but she knew that there must be something that could be done.

"My husband . . ." she began.

"Your husband," the man said, "has just left for work, and he won't be home for hours."

Her throat was so tight and constricted now that she could scarcely choke out any words at all. But she had to try, she had to. "He'll be back any minute," she lied, desperately. "He forgot something."

"What?"

"His—his brief case."

The man smiled, seemingly almost in admiration. "That could be true," he conceded softly. "But I didn't see him carrying a brief case when he left. Show it to me, and maybe I'll get scared and leave."

She could have wept in her chagrin. The man must have read the disappointment in her face, because his smile grew wider. "Are you expecting any other company?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," she replied quickly, instinctively. "My next-door neighbor comes over for coffee every morning." Oh, dear, wonderful Naomi—how welcome she'd be if she'd come to visit now! But she wouldn't. There was no possibility of it.

The man nodded. "That could be true too," he said. "A woman, huh? Well, that doesn't worry me. I could handle her. Do you know something? I sat in my car down at the end of the block and counted 'em. There are sixteen houses here, and I counted sixteen men leaving for work."

Kit's fear had become almost terror now. And terror is blind, unreasoning, helpless. Oh, Naomi, I'm so sorry . . .

"But even if it's only a woman," the man was saying, "I wouldn't want to be interrupted."

He reached behind him with his free hand, and turned the lock on the door. Then he tested the knob to make sure.

You don't need to do that, she thought despairingly. Nobody will be coming to that door. They're all angry with me. They all hate me. They wouldn't come to my door if

they were starving, or if the house was on fire.

"You got any more funny stories, lady?" he asked her.

She shook her head numbly. He took his first step toward her then.

She thought she was going to scream, automatically, despite the threat of the knife. Her mouth opened, but no sound came. For an instant she had the desperate idea of flinging herself past him toward the door or trying to dive through one of the screened windows. But her body seemed incapable of any such big, demanding effort. She could only back away a step, to match the step he had taken, to keep the original distance between them. But he came on.

When her back encountered the wall, she knew she had to turn. And she chose to retreat down the hallways because in that direction she could retreat farther. Only then did a desperately slim chance of escaping him occur to her. There was a lock on the bathroom door. Could she get inside, close and lock the door before he reached her?

The man was obviously patient, and supremely confident of himself. He knew he had her trapped, and seemed even to enjoy her feeble efforts to keep him at a distance. Carefully, she tried to increase the few feet separating them. He followed her slowly, cautiously, constantly alert. As they passed the kitchen, his gaze flicked momentarily toward the running water in the sink.

She seized that small opportunity. She turned, flung herself desperately around the corner of the hallway. The suddenness of her movement did take him by surprise. In another second she was in the bathroom. She swung the door shut, fumbled with the lock and managed to get it turned.

But she had gained only an instant of relative safety, just time enough to stagger to the screen window and struggle frantically with the fastenings at its case. She heard the door knob rattle, violently and then—a single, hard, pounding thud as his fist crashed against the door frame in the vicinity of the lock, splintering it. The door flew open as if from a gust of wind . . . and then the man was standing there in the doorway, grinning at her with mockery in his eyes.

"See," he said, "all you did was spoil a nice door."

She didn't quite faint then. But everything began to swim before her eyes—the room, the man, the knife. Her brain was numb, incapable of taking further action. She was terrifyingly aware of how surprisingly strong the man was, despite his slender build. He had battered down the door so easily.

She knew that she could do nothing to escape him. She could only hope now that in the end he

would not kill her. But even that hope was dim, vague. She was not sure that she would want to live.

He had her by the wrist now, and he was dragging her toward the bedroom. She did not plead or beg, knowing instinctively that it would be useless.

And then, from somewhere, came a sound. She heard it. And the man heard it too, because he let go of her wrist and stood listening, tense, his shoulders hunched. Slowly, carefully, he turned away from her, and faced the bedroom doorway. The knife weaved in his hand, ready, waiting.

The sound came again, and she could identify it now. It was the back screen door opening. The back door was unlocked, she remembered suddenly. She hadn't given a thought to the back door, and neither, apparently, had the man. But someone was entering by the back door now. There were footsteps in the kitchen. Hesitant, reluctant footsteps. Would they come this far?

She wasn't sure she wanted them to come. Should she scream a warning? Even if by some miracle it was Tony coming back, she didn't want him coming in here. He would have no weapon. He would be badly hurt, perhaps killed.

The man stood waiting. He crouched lower, and the weaving motion of the knife grew larger, wider, like the head of a snake rearing to strike. Waiting for the intruder, who was just a step away now.

Naomi! She stood there suddenly in the doorway, staring at them. Noami, in halter and shorts, her round, plain face startled, her mouth hanging open.

They confronted one another in complete silence for a long moment, while the man hesitated. Then Naomi turned, and Kit had never seen her move any faster. Naomi ran back down the hallway, and at the same time she started to scream.

It all confused the man. Obviously he could not decide which way to go. Should he pursue the woman and stop her screaming, possibly with the knife, and by so doing risk leaving Kit alone in the bedroom? Or should he let the other woman escape and rouse the neighborhood, while he turned his attention swiftly back to his victim?

He hesitated until he no longer had any choice. They heard the back screen crashing open and Naomi's scream becoming louder. It didn't stop but went on and on. Then faintly, from a distance other voices began to answer.

The man turned back to Kit, his lips set in tight lines, his eyes feverishly bright. He was obviously still trying to decide how to cope with this unexpected turn of

events. Slightly, ever so slightly, Kit dared to hope.

"I wouldn't have time," he said, "I wouldn't have time . . . I want it peaceful and quiet."

But he didn't seem afraid. He continued to stare at her, his eyes narrowing to gleaming pinpoints.

"We'll go somewhere else," he said.

Then he lunged. He gripped her by the wrist and she found herself being dragged again. Out of the bedroom, down the hallway. Understanding his purpose now, she began to fight him.

She caught hold of a closet doorknob first, and it took him a moment to pull her away from it. She bounced against a wall, but felt no pain. Her groping free hand found another anchor, the doorless arch of the kitchen entrance. She held on frantically for another moment.

He stopped pulling and thrust his body against hers, putting his face close to her face. His breath, smelling of sour wine, nearly overpowered her. "You're not going to get away from me, baby," he said. "Not till I'm finished with you."

She kicked at him then, and he answered by letting go of her wrist and slapping her hard with the open palm of his hand. Even that way, the blow nearly stunned her. Then he had her wrist again and was pulling her through the living room toward the front door. She fought as best she could. Her efforts delayed him but didn't stop him.

He had a little trouble unlocking the front door, and then again as she was being dragged through it, she caught hold of the door frame and held on for a moment. He was cursing now, and his face was glazed with sweat. But his strength was irresistible.

Outdoor she had a vague glimpse of a subdivision in turmoil. At least half a dozen women were screaming and shouting. She saw halter-and-shorts-clad figures running over lawns, but seemingly only in terror, without purpose. As the man had boasted, what could a bunch of women do?

The man was half pulling, half carrying her down her own front yard. His car was at the curb. He yanked open the door on the passenger's side, and sent her reeling in with a blow on the back. Her head came into violent contact with the steering wheel. Again there was no pain, only a momentary blackness passing before her eyes.

Before she could try to escape again, he was around the car and into the driver's seat, fumbling with the ignition. When she made a motion toward the door, the back of his right hand came crashing up against her face. This time she felt blood on the inside of her mouth. Her head snapped back and she could not seem to right it again. She knew somehow she could resist no more.

After that she was aware of events only as an indifferent spectator, not as an actor in them. The engine started and the car lurched forward. But something was wrong. The car rode with a strange jolting motion, and the man had to wrestle with the wheel. Finally he stopped, got out, and went around to the front of the car to investigate. There seemed to be some trouble with a front tire.

Vaguely then there came to Kit the consciousness that she was not alone. The women had not been running about aimlessly after all. They had been trying to help her. And one of them apparently had done something to one of the tires.

The man had gotten back into the driver's seat again. But now there was activity in the street ahead. Two cars were there, completely blocking the way. Kit saw women running away from the cars. The man braked with a loud curse.

He got out again, and strode to the barricade. What he found apparently didn't please him. He seemed to be searching for keys to the stalled cars with a desperate kind of urgency.

When he returned to Kit he had a wild look. She had had no opportunity to consider whether he was insane or not. But he certainly seemed to be at that moment. He screeched the car into reverse, and backed a few feet. Then he wrestled strenuously with the wheel and the car roared forward. He was taking to the sloping lawns to avoid the barricade. The car kicked and bucked as it hit the uneven ground, and the flat tire made matters worse. Kit had to hang on grimly to avoid being smashed against the dashboard.

Then he did what she had been afraid that he would do. As he swerved to get back into the street, the big elm in the Standish yard loomed up before them. A more skillful driver might have avoided it, but the man was in a panic by this time. The car slammed straight into the tree with a crunching of metal that sounded final and irrevocable.

Kit, who had seen it coming, saved herself from injury by leaping sharply back from the windshield.

The man sat there for a full minute after the crash, venting his fury in terrible oaths. Then he turned to her, a convulsive fury in his face.

"Your friends think they're going to save you but they're not!"

He had her by the wrist again and was pulling her out of the car on the driver's side. Then he commenced to run, over the lawns, in the direction of the woods behind the houses. She couldn't keep pace with him. She staggered and fell. For a few steps he simply dragged her along, then stopped to yank her back to her feet.

She didn't know exactly how

the next thing came about. She didn't know whether the women had followed them and overtaken them, or whether they had anticipated the man's action and were there waiting. But suddenly—they were there. Six or seven shouting, infuriated women. And every one of them brandished a weapon—a shovel, a pitchfork, an axe, a butcher knife.

The man screamed.

She saw and heard the end of it dimly, half-consciously. He had let go of her wrist and left her lying in the grass. And he had tried to run in another direction, only to be intercepted by a woman wildly swinging a grass sickle.

He tripped then and fell in a coil of garden hose. When he rose again, he was surrounded on all sides. He backed against the wall of a house and the pitchfork lunged forward to within an inch of his chest, and stayed there. She could hear him sobbing like a child.

Finally—and it was the last sound she was aware of—she heard the police siren. Someone had thought of that too.

WHEN SHE CAME home the next morning with a few strips of adhesive tape covering her scars, every last one of them was there. They brought their own coffee and rolls, and had a breakfast party in her living room. What she had most on her mind was apologies and gratitude.

But there was something else that couldn't wait either. She turned to Naomi Simpson, dear, chubby, wonderful Naomi. "We'd just had an argument," she said. "We weren't even speaking to each other. What on earth gave you the idea of coming into my house?"

"Honey, I've got a confession to make," Naomi said, reddening. "I was plenty mad at you too. I guess I wanted to get even with you in some way. I was probably trying to convince myself you were so close-mouthed because you had something to hide. And then sure enough, as soon as your husband leaves for work, here comes this strange car and this strange man. Do you know what I thought, honey? I thought you had a boy friend on the side. So I came right in your back door. I was going to catch you. Of course when I saw him there with that knife . . . Kit honey, you've got a big, king-size apology coming from me!"

They all laughed at that, although it was almost not very funny.

A New MIKE SHAYNE Novelet Next Issue

the musical DOLL

By HELEN KASSON

The little girl seemed serious and intelligent far beyond her years. Perhaps that was only natural though, the Inspector told himself. Murder, in any frame, called for seriousness.

THE DOLL TURNED slowly, its china arms spread, its hard toes stretched taut in the immemorial position of ballet. The tiny music box beneath her played a sad, nostalgic tune. Minor notes tinkled down, then up, then down again through three weeping phrases. Then the box was silent for a moment while the doll kept turning, until the faint little tune began again. It was a Gypsy song but, because of the small mechanism, it

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held no Gypsy joy—only hopelessness and a heartbreaking melancholy.

The walls of the room were covered with unframed pictures, experiments in color, style and feeling, groping and unrealized. They might have been dream experiences which, for an instant, the dreamer had understood but had been unable to recapture on awakening.

In one corner stood an easel supporting a half-finished picture of interblending planes, while on a tray at its base lay a palette smeared with daubs of paint and poppy-seed oil from an overturned can.

The little girl with the honey-colored pigtails sat on a chair in front of a flat-topped desk, her round amber eyes fastened solemnly on the dancing doll, her body moving in a small circle which continued for a moment even after the notes slowed and finally stopped. She stared thoughtfully, then picked up the box, wound it and set it back on the desk again.

The tune started once more, a little faster now, yet still without gaiety, still mournful. The slightly off-key notes cascaded down and up and down again in weird, disconsolate sequence.

For a moment longer she let her eyes follow the ballet doll in its ceaseless turning. Then, remembering, she looked at the clock on the wall. She arose, walked across the room to a table on which a telephone stood, picked up the slip of paper which lay beside the receiver and dialed a number.

"Hello," she said, in a thin and reedy voice. "Is this the Police Station?" The tinkling notes sounded in counterpoint behind her, making her voice seem even thinner for an instant.

"My name is Betty Lorman. I live at nine hundred and twelve River Lane, River Hills." Holding the slip of paper with one hand where she could read from it, she added, "Please send a policeman over. Someone is dead."

She hung up the receiver, replaced the slip on the telephone table and crossed the room, past the outstretched body on the floor, and back to the desk where the doll still turned.

Three minutes later, when the knock sounded, she was still watching the doll. For the third time the notes were slowing. She picked up the music box and twisted the key on its bottom a few times before she arose, and went to open the door.

Immediately the room was filled, both with the bodies of the two policemen (they were close to six feet tall) and with their involuntary recoil. One was young and one was old, but against the duality of the small child and the inert body they stood as one, aghast and incredulous, unable even to admit to consciousness, as yet, the incongru-

ous tinkling tune to which the doll still turned in its interminable dance.

Tom Wallace, the old Inspector, pushed the child behind him, shielding her with his big body from the corpse with its bullet-pierced chest and glazed, half-open eyes.

"'Phone in the report, Burns," he murmured, and walked with her to the chair in front of the desk, sat down on it and drew her onto his lap.

The notes from the music box slowed and died. The sound of dialing scraped unevenly and then Burns' low, almost whispering voice took over.

Betty reached toward the musical doll but Wallace stayed her hand, covering it with one of his own big ones. With the other, he stroked her honey-colored hair back from her forehead.

"Who is it, child?" he asked.

"My Uncle Bob."

"Who killed him?"

Her eyes strayed toward the music box. He was startled to see how calm they were. "He died from natural causes," she said evenly.

"Who told you to say that?" The words came in harsh staccato, though he had not intended that they should. "You're only about ten, aren't you?"

"I s'pose so. Daddy didn't believe in counting years. He always said Mother was younger than I was."

"All right. Even at ten you ought to realize that being shot through the heart isn't dying from natural causes."

He let go of her hand to remove his hat. The moment it was free, she reached out and picked up the doll.

"Put that thing down!" He snatched it from her.

"Give it back Give me back my doll!" Tears filled her amber eyes as she lunged futilely for it, her tiny arm reaching no farther than his elbow.

"So you *can* get excited," Wallace said. "Not about a dead man but about a doll. What's the matter with you, anyway?" His voice softened a little. "Your Uncle's dead. Didn't you like him?"

"Of course I did. We played games—Uncle Bob and Mother and I."

"Not your Daddy?"

"No, Daddy was different. I felt *safe* with Daddy. Please give me my doll!"

"I found this, sir." Marty Burns handed the slip of paper from the telephone table to Wallace.

"Lakeview five five-thousand." The old Inspector read aloud, his voice growing huskier and more disbelieving, until finally, at the end, he was whispering in a sort of breathless protest against the words. *"Is this the Police Station? My name is Betty Lorman . . . Someone is dead."*

"So they left this paper with

you," Wallace said, "and told you to wait a certain length of time, and then to call the police. How long did they tell you to wait?"

"Two hours." The child's nose twitched with the effort to keep from crying. "I wish I could hold my doll!"

She grasped it eagerly as he brought it within reach and, for a moment, let one hand lie on the stiff tulle skirt, as a blind man in a strange room might rest his hand against a wall to draw confidence from its solidity before he ventured further.

"Don't wind it, though," the Inspector said, holding Burns where he stood beside them with a faint, almost unnoticeable flicker of one eyelid. "Tell me about Mother and Daddy. What do they look like?"

"Daddy looks like me," the child said. "Only he's round and a lot taller and his hair's thin in front. Not as tall as him, though." She looked up at the young policeman who, even under her child's eyes, flushed and twitched self-consciously.

"And he isn't as tall as Uncle Bob either, or as dark," she concluded.

"Good. And Mother?"

"Soft like a kitten. With sky-blue eyes and hair like black clouds. Curly, not ropy like mine."

"Is that the way Daddy described her?" Wallace asked, dismissing Burns with another twitch of his eye.

"Daddy, or Uncle Bob. I can't remember. Anyway, it's the way she *felt.*"

"I guess Uncle Bob was Daddy's brother, not Mother's."

She nodded, fastening her eyes again in that still, almost expressionless concentration on the doll, not seeming to hear either the rasp of the dial under Burns' finger or the spare, pointed words, the first-fired arrow of the hunter which, even if it missed its mark, would land somewhere and so change, however infinitesimally, the pattern of things as they now existed.

"All right. Where did they go?"

"It doesn't matter. They said you'd take care of me."

"Scheming, heartless devils!" The words burst from the old Inspector. "That's what they are. To leave a child—" For only the second time since they had come into the room, his words were addressed to Burns.

When the call had come to Police Headquarters in the thin, child's voice they had, of course, thought it was a hoax. But the Inspector was through for the day and so was Burns, so they rode over to River Lane together just on the one chance in a hundred that it wasn't some teenager holding her nose and making her voice high and talking through a handkerchief stretched over the mouthpiece in an effort to get some friend—or enemy of the moment—into trouble.

The Inspector and Burns hadn't yet been out on a case together—Burns was pretty new in the department—and the difference in age and rank, added to their lack of knowledge of each other, had kept conversation at a minimum.

Betty set the doll firmly on the top of the desk turning to look fully for the first time at Wallace. "That isn't true," she said angrily. "You said that because you think I was scared, because you think they shouldn't have left me with Uncle Bob. But I *wasn't* scared. Death is nothing to be afraid of."

"Who told you that?" For a moment Wallace forgot he was talking to a child. "The same person who told you to say your uncle died from natural causes?"

She nodded. "Daddy. But he didn't say exactly that. He said Uncle Bob died as the natural result of a chain of events."

"And did he tell you who killed him?"

"He didn't have to," she said. "I knew."

"Well who?" Wallace asked, staring hard at her.

"We all did."

Wallace drew a deep and exasperated breath. Across the room Burns stared thoughtully at a blue painting in a blue frame—either undersea or stratospheric—then shrugged and opened a door which led to one of the bedrooms off the living room.

"Look, honey," Wallace said. "I have a little girl of my own who was your age once. She looked a little like you, too—only she was blonder. And she used to sit on my lap a lot. Just like this.

"Did you ever sit on your Daddy's lap, and put your head against his chest?" He put one big, hairy hand over her face, almost covering it, and pressed it back. "And did you ever, then, talk about things you'd never talk about when you were sitting up looking at him? And weren't those things the true things, because you couldn't possibly say anything that wasn't true when you were leaning back against him, hearing his heart beat under your ear?"

"Yes," she said softly. "Only Daddy told *me* the true things then."

"Tell me some of them. Tell me some of the true things Daddy told you."

"That I was strong. That I could take care of Mother. That I shouldn't be afraid of anything—not even death."

"And then, after Uncle Bob died," Wallace asked gently, "did Daddy tell you to tell me you had all killed him?"

"No. I knew we had. Because I knew I'd helped to start it."

"But who fired the gun?" Wallace demanded, "and why?"

"That doesn't matter. It was when I switched the letters that counted. And that's part of 'why.' "

" . . . Tess! Tess! I've won First Prize!"

She yawned, opening her pink mouth so the white little teeth showed, close-set and sharp, like a frame around a picture of her tongue; then burrowed deeper into the soft nest of quilts and pillows.

"What?" she asked dully.

"The picture. The Fellows Contest. I've won it! Only," he paused, his wide forehead wrinkling, "the check isn't here."

She roused slightly. She was fully dressed. It was late afternoon but she had been drinking and had gone to bed to sleep it off.

"You didn't win," she said, "and you never will. Why don't you give up trying?"

"This time I did! Here's the letter. It's addressed to me, see? Mr. P. Lorman—" He started to hand it to her, then withdrew it suddenly and carried it to the window, snapping the shade to the top with such force that it twirled around until the circle at the end finally stopped it.

Her laughter started slowly, only a faint titter at first, but it grew deeper and turned raucous, gaining impetus and strength, until, at the end, she was rolling on the bed. She raised her knees to her chest, then flung her legs straight, beating her feet and holding her aching stomach.

"That kid," she spluttered. "That kid'll do anything for you. . . ."

"Uncle Bob left the letter saying *he'd* won," Betty said, "and I erased the *R*, so that it looked like a *P*, and then I opened Daddy's envelope—it wasn't stuck tight—and saw that he only got Honorable Mention. So I put Uncle Bob's letter in and glued it shut again.

"I thought it would make him happy," she said. "I'd forgotten about the check. And it did make him happy for a minute. But that just wasn't worth the awful way he felt when he found out what I'd done. And it wasn't worth the awful fight he had either."

"With Uncle Bob?" Wallace asked. "Was that this morning?"

"No, with Mother, because Mother laughed. And it wasn't this morning. It was a long time ago."

"Well, let's get back to this morning. Did you go to school today? Was Uncle Bob lying there on the floor when you got home?"

"Yes, he was dead when I got home," Betty said. "You don't have to be afraid to say the word. Daddy was here and he talked to me and then they gave me the note to read over the telephone and they kissed me and they left."

"You said *Daddy* was here, and then *they* kissed me. Where was Mother when you got home?"

Before she answered, Betty sat up straight, taking her head away from Wallace's chest. "Mother was here," she said after a moment. "In the bedroom."

"And was Mother upset?"

"Yes. So was Daddy. But this morning she was happier than she's ever been."

"Now put your head back," Wallace pressed gently against her face, "and tell me everything that happened since you got up this morning. You washed your face and brushed your teeth and . . ."

"I'm all dressed, Mother. May I have breakfast now?"

"Give her breakfast, Peter. I'm sick."

"What's it from this time?"

"What's it ever from? Rotgut."

"Why do you drink it?"

"Why do I drink it? he asks. I drink it to escape, that's why!"

"To escape what, Tess? Your guilty conscience? Because you told me Betty wasn't mine?"

"It's the truth."

"Why do you need to torture me, Tess? You and I both know she is."

"Because you're so damnned virtuous. You don't drink, you don't smoke—and you don't understand people who have to."

"I understand you, Tess. You're a baby with the devil in you and you've never learned to walk."

"What are you talking about?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm going to leave you."

"Leave me? You can't, Peter!"

"I can. It's the only way I can win. The only thing *I can win—aloneness."*

"Aloneness? Peter, I need *you! I wouldn't be* anything *without you. Peter . . . Peter . . . please."*

"Did you ever love me, Tess?"

"Darling, I did. I do! I've grown up now and I do."

"Have you really, baby? Prove it!"

"I will . . . I lied about Betty . . . She's yours, ours."

"Of course, I belonged to all three of them," Betty said.

"Anyway, Mother *and* Daddy came out and got my breakfast and while I was eating we laughed and had fun and Mother looked beautiful and happy."

"And then, when you got home from school you found Uncle Bob was dead. Didn't you cry? Didn't you feel bad? Didn't you ask why your Daddy killed him?"

"We all cried. We hated to have him dead. But we knew why he *was* dead. When something's in your way it has to be removed."

"Even something you love?"

"You can love something or someone and it can still be in your way."

"All right. How was Uncle Bob in Daddy's way? Did he live here? Was it too crowded?"

"No, he boarded down the street. He wasn't really-truly in the way. Not like a chair you keep falling over all the time or a door that opens in front of your toy chest, so you can't get at it, or a winter coat that you never wear that's hang-

ing in front of all the other things you do wear—or a—or a—"

"I get it," Wallace said shortly. "He wasn't really-truly in the way, but he wasn't just-pretend in the way either, or else your Daddy wouldn't have had to kill him. His body wasn't in the way, but some of the things he said or did or thought were in the way. In the way of your Daddy's happiness?"

"That's right. That's exactly right."

"Good. Now, let's get down to business. *How* was he in the way of your Daddy's happiness?"

"He kept winning things."

"*Winning* things!" Wallace repeated incredulously.

"Yes. When he and Daddy were young, Uncle Bob won a scholarship. So he went to College."

"I see. And Daddy didn't?"

"No. And then, I told you how Uncle Bob won first prize in the art contest. I can't figure why. It was only some old flowers. Daddy's picture was better. 'Death Riding a White Rat.' "

"Good Lord!" Wallace said. "Well, anyway, what else did Uncle Bob win—that your Daddy wanted, I mean?"

"I don't remember them all. An electric clock once, but we already had one. Any, it was more of a *feeling* Daddy had . . . Oh, and then a long time ago, there was a girl. At first, I thought it was Mother, until I realized Daddy had won *her*."

"Of course," Wallace said slowly, the wrinkles beside his old eyes hardening into the semblance of rutted stone.

Burns came out of the bedroom holding two pieces of a torn scarf. "I found this, sir."

"Uncle Bob gave that to Mother," Betty said, and slid off the Inspector's lap.

"What of it, Burns?" Wallace's voice sounded tired and far away.

"It has been torn wilfully." Burns looked very young as he stood there with the red and blue silk pieces trailing from his hand, and a little worried, because he was afraid he was going to say something presumptuous.

Betty turned the music box over and wound it. Once more the sad little tune rose and descended, through the three weeping phrases, stopped for a moment and then began again, while the doll, its arms outstretched, turned endlessly.

"I've been listening to you talk to the little girl," Burns said, "and I thought you did a fine job of it. I wish I could talk to children that way. But I can't, because I'm not married or anything and I was an only child and I've never had experience with children. They frighten me, to be completely honest about it."

The lines beside the old Inspector's eyes softened just a little, or changed somehow infinitesimally from rutted stone to a gentler, more flexible series of wrinkles—a series

which might have been started long ago by too much smiling. It was true, he did understand children, having had four of his own. And he did understand young policemen, having had many more than four of them around him. So he said, "What is it you're trying to tell me, Burns? What's bothering you?"

"Only this, sir. As I said, I'm not married, and I guess I'm sort of romantic. I've been thinking how it would be if you loved a woman and if that woman was—well, partly a child."

He paused for a long while to let the flush which had come to his face recede, and then he said, "And I've been listening to the little girl talk. And somehow she isn't just like a child. So if the man were sort of a father type and his wife treated him like a parent—if she lied to him and was glad when bad things happened to him, as some children are, I understand, or think they are anyway—well then, if this man had to make a choice, he might choose to protect the woman who was a child rather than the child who was a woman.

"Because the chances are, the woman would always be a child, while the little girl had a chance of growing up into a real woman. And maybe, the man thought that a little unhappiness and experience and responsibility would help the child grow into a *better* woman. Then too, the child has a whole life ahead of her in which to forget and learn and be happy, while the woman who is a child has only *now* and not much left of that."

"I don't follow you," Wallace said a little brusquely. "What are you getting at?"

"I guess I'm not making much sense. I'll try again, though maybe it isn't even worth the saying. When I found the torn scarf and Betty said her uncle had given it to her mother, it made me wonder."

Burns stopped short and mopped his forehead, certain he had overstepped the bounds of rank.

The music box ran down and, in the new silence, Burns felt Betty's eyes on him. He met them for an instant. They were alert, expectant, waiting in a sort of suspended stillness. Strangely, she did not move to re-wind the box.

"Go on," Wallace said. "It made you wonder what?"

"I know you've sort of taken it for granted that the man killed his brother," Burns said apologetically. "But from what Betty said about her mother's being so happy this morning—it occurred to me that maybe that happiness was jeopardized later. You see, the mother knew that as long as her husband's brother was alive, her husband would never *feel* himself to be top man. And her husband had to feel important if they were going to live in that safe, fairy-book world. Then too, maybe if there weren't another child-adult around—like

Betty's uncle—to show her husband up, she wouldn't have to drink."

"It's all very neat," Wallace said wearily. "So the husband took her away to protect her at the expense of Betty—because he thought Betty was young enough to throw it off and his wife was *too* young. But you're just guessing, Burns. The torn scarf is nothing. She might have torn it in a fit of anger. That doesn't mean she killed the man who gave it to her."

"I know, sir. There's no real proof." Burns looked across at the child and, for a moment, their eyes clung together across the empty air. "But Betty knows," he said.

Betty set the music box down carefully without taking her eyes from Burns' face, but she kept one hand on it, as if it gave her comfort. "We all did it," she said. "But Mother fired the gun."

Burns opened his other hand and laid four torn pieces of paper on the desk before Wallace. "I found these too, sir."

The old Inspector bent his head to fit the scraps together. There was only one sentence, written in ink, dated that morning. *"Being of sound mind, I leave all my worldly goods to my daughter, Betty Lorman."* It was signed, *"Robert Lorman."*

"It may or may not be true," Burns said. "Betty's mother may have asked him not to come around any more and, out of spite, he threatened to show it to the husband."

"Good thinking, Burns."

"Well, I figured, sir, that the father being the kind of man he was—a father to both his wife and his child—if *he* had killed his brother, he'd have gone off alone. There'd be no reason for him to take his wife then. He'd have left her with Betty."

"All right." The old Inspector looked tired. "It's all very neat, but what's the difference? They'll probably both get caught. It's difficult for two people to escape the law forever."

"There's one way they could, sir," Burns said. "If they were dead," he added softly.

The old Inspector's eyes could not have been more startled if he had not spent most of his life looking at death and the perpetrators of it. "No," he said.

"They only killed their *bodies,*" Betty whispered. "Daddy told that was all, that I shouldn't feel alone." Her eyes were glazed, as if she were thinking—or praying.

"But to leave a child—" the Inspector said.

Before he spoke, Burns looked at Betty. Her eyes were fastened on him in a sort of tense concentration, as if she were willing him to say or do something.

"He prepared her," Burns said. "He made her strong. He hoped someone would take her. As a matter of fact," he cleared his throat

and hesitated, but only for an instant. "If you'll give me time . . . if I can find someone who'll have me . . . I wouldn't mind . . ." His voice trailed off.

The music box started playing. It was wound tighter and the tinkling notes sounded less off-key, and somehow the tune sounded only tenderly nostalgic now.

"I thought you were afraid of children," Wallace said gently.

"I was, until now." Burns smiled at Betty and, surprisingly, a dimple appeared in his left cheek.

"Well, yes, I'll give you time," the old Inspector said. "And meanwhile, I have a wife already . . ."

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A DRAMATICALLY SEARING SHORT MURDER NOVEL

by JOHN C. FLEMING and LOIS EBY

THE CALIFORNIA SUNSHINE was warm and thick; a slight breeze of buoyant, sparkling air moved restlessly through the palm trees. They were lying close together by the edge of Desert Spa's gleaming pool.

A boy in white, starched coat brought an extension telephone from the Spa, plugged it in with practiced efficiency, tucked the receiver against Jerry's ear. From the curve of his arm, Bina heard metallic buzzings that sounded vaguely like the voice of Jerry's secretary, Lorraine.

Then he replaced the instrument, handed it back and tightened his arm around Bina. "Even on a guy's honeymoon."

"No!"

"The Hanlon deal's cooking."

"If it's just a few days . . ."

"Weeks probably. Even months. Some nights."

For a long time they lay without moving. Then he kissed her and sat up, reaching for his towel. And with this motion, the languor, the lovely drifting endlessness broke. Time rushed in upon them with a terrible pressure. And fear.

Bina sat up, expertly twisting dark hair into a loose circle, pin-

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ning it up. "Maybe," she tried to keep her voice light, "I should stay out here until we find a house."

"You can't hunt houses in Beverly Hills from Palm Springs." He was sliding her feet into wooden sandals. The old strain was back in his voice, almost hidden under a new man-of-the-house tone of command. "Look, angel, we had the most secret courtship in history —thanks to your father. From now on, it's cards on the table."

Bina walked beside him to the hotel office. "The papers," she said tightly.

While Jerry paid their bill, the clerk handed her the Los Angeles papers he had been saving for her. "Back in the world again, huh?" he commiserated.

In their room, they went through the stack of papers carefully. And when they had finished, Jerry said, "I told you. You're not scared to go back now, are you?"

Bina smiled at him uncertainly, "I don't think so—not with you."

There had only been two notices of their marriage. One in a gossip column: "Jerry Crevellin's gone and done it, and we're wishing him all happiness with the beauteous Bina (Ryan)—whose father is a real, live detective on the Beverly Hills Police Force, in case you didn't know."

The news account read: "Jerald Crevellin, prominent, young Beverly Hills broker, was married yesterday at Las Vegas to Bina Ryan. Miss Ryan was secretary to Mr. Crevellin's aunt, the late Mrs. Clarissa Crevellin, well known social leader."

Bina released her breath. "They don't make it sound like we married too soon."

"Only your dad counts months so hard."

Bina couldn't really blame Jerry for his bitterness toward her father, she reminded herself later as she drowsed contentedly beside her husband in the car, conscious of his strong hands on the wheel, his handsome, tanned face under the thatch of blond hair, bleached almost white from the desert sun.

The worry lines, too, that had bothered her, were smoothed away. It was a miracle, really, she thought, that he had ever wanted anything to do again with Detective Lefty Ryan *or* his daughter, Bina.

From the first moment, on that horrible night when the doctor's call had brought the police and Bina to find Clarissa's body still at the bottom of the stairs, Lefty had seemed to have it in for Jerry Crevellin.

It was Lefty, who had insisted on an intensive search of the house, finger printing, the works. Lefty, who had questioned and re-questioned Jerry in his office after Clarissa's diary had fretted about his friendship with Dennis Moresby.

It had seemed to her that Lefty's

usual bluntness had a thrust of vitriol, as he faced Jerry. "Your aunt was a little worried about some of your friends. You did handle her investments?"

"I did." Jerry had been magnificent about it, Bina thought, his voice unsteady from shock and grief, but his answers given quietly, without resentment. "I came from Boston several years ago when Aunt Clarissa offered to set me up in an office of my own, with her business as a starter."

"You had a brokerage business in Boston?"

"It was a partnership."

Lefty's square fingers thrummed. "Couple of places in your aunt's diary, sounded like she was wondering whether you were mishandling—or planning to mishandle—her money. Did you know that?"

Jerry met Lefty's probing gaze firmly. "No, I certainly didn't know it," he said. "Or I would have checked everything over with her."

"This Dennis Moresby she seemed to be upset over your seeing. He a stock broker too?"

"He is."

"But you weren't investing—or planning to invest—any of your aunt's capital through him?"

"No."

And then Lefty asked the question Bina had prayed he wouldn't ask. "Did you know your aunt had her secretary checking up on you?"

Bina's purse slid out of suddenly damp fingers. She stooped for it, avoiding Jerry's eyes.

"No, I didn't." His voice was definitely startled.

Bina broke in then, spots of color on her cheeks. "She sent me to a few big parties. But I saw *noth—*"

"Was Dennis Moresby at any of those parties?" Her father turned on her sharply.

She glared at him angrily, but she knew better than to try an, "I don't remember" on Lefty, who hated evasion as a plague. "Of course, Mr. Moresby and his wife were there," she flared. "They are in the crowd that Mr. Crevellin is in. Mr. Crevellin was friendly with the Moresbys just as he is with thirty other couples.

"No secret conferences?"

"No!" The denial burst out to cover her instant of hesitation. You couldn't, she reasoned with quick defiance, call Jerry's sitting with the Moresbys at a table in a crowded room *secret*. And their absorbing conversation *could* have been politics, or the weather!

But finally, it was the look on Lefty's face when he came raging out of their rustic, canyon house the night Jerry drove Bina home after her long day of writing sympathy acknowledgements at the Crevellin house.

Jerry had asked to take her home dutifully, and then forgotten her, driving with jaw clamped in a

pale and tortured face, a man suffering under the weight of things life had piled up against him. Finally, he had remembered to thank her for her sympathetic report on him in her father's office. But he did even this absently, as though he was still too shocked by the whole affair to consider it real.

It was then they turned into the Ryan drive and Bina saw Lefty slamming out to meet them. She called a quick goodbye and jumped from the car, hoping Jerry would get safely out of range before Lefty reached the driveway.

But Jerry had not even noticed her father. He got out of the car politely to see her to her door—and Lefty knocked him down! Then, while Jerry sprawled, dazed, spitting gravel, Lefty had jerked him to his feet and shoved him back into his car like a criminal, with a terse threat.

"Get out of here and stay out! You're not getting my daughter involved in a murder rap!"

No, she couldn't blame Jerry. Bina moved closer to him in the car now, slid her arm through his. "Darling."

"Uh huh?"

"You don't mind . . . ?"

After a minute, he kissed the top of her head. "If you call your father?"

Her words tumbled out on a torrent of feeling she couldn't dam any longer. "He'll be crazy because I deceived him, ran away to get married. Knowing it's his fault. Knowing if he hadn't knocked you down that day, I wouldn't have called to apologize, met you to explain—gone on meeting you . . . But he'll forgive me. I'm all he has. And—he's a great guy, Jerry. You'll see."

His arm pressed hers hard against him. "Calm down, sweet. The shooting's over. Even your smoke-eating old man should be able to see I've proved my point. You're married to me and not dragged into any mess. Invite him to dinner if you want. Why shouldn't we all be friends?"

She sat there quiet, her cheek against his sleeve, watching the lights of the city creep around them. Dope, she thought, worrying about Jerry, the sweetest, squarest guy in the world. Jerry, who could fall in love with a girl who had checked on him, heckled him!

II

THEY CAME IN over the Hollywood freeway, that wound above the dingy, east section of town, giving the panoramic scope of a great city. She was on a new speedway of her own, Bina thought. The same world, but married to Jerry, suddenly a new one. Exciting, warm, promising. A world of height and depth and thrilling vistas. A world where you dreamed with your eyes wide open. Where every beat of time was measured and heavy with love.

At Beverly Hills, they cut over to Wilshire and followed its winding curves west for a mile before turning up the narrow drive that hugged the lavish slab of apartment building Jerry called home. On the other side of the drive a thirty-foot excavation yawned.

Bina whistled. "They've been busy while you were away."

"Must be going to build a skyscraper from the size of that hole." Jerry swung the car into its parking stall. Loaded with suitcases and tennis racquets, they went in through the back entrance, and took the small service elevator.

"Married or not," Bina observed, "I feel guilty going into a man's apartment."

"You won't feel guilty by the time you've scrubbed the cobwebs out of that refrigerator," Jerry assured her.

At his door, he put down his luggage, turned his key in the lock, and gathered Bina up, suitcases and all.

"You'll break your back!" Bina cried, laughing, as he carried her over the threshold.

"Isn't that what husbands are for?"

He stood there in the smart cubicle of hall laughing with her, and then suddenly sniffed. "Lobster thermador!"

"Silly," Bina laughed.

At this minute, Toto moved around the corner and came toward them, with his slippering, half run. His Oriental face glistened with grinning excitement.

"Welcome. Welcome!" He made a giggling bow.

Jerry slid Bina from his arms and together they stared at the houseboy, who had left the Crevellin place after Clarissa's death to work for her young, clubwoman friend, Marge Norris.

"It *is* lobster thermador." Jerry beamed at the boy.

"How do you happen to be here tonight?" Bina demanded.

Toto giggled again. "I a loan," he said. "Missa Canby, your secretery, tell Missa Norris you come today. Missa Norris tell me come make dinner."

"Good old Marge," Jerry approved. "You can help me get this junk into the bedroom, Toto." He picked up his suitcases and rounded the corner into the living room —to bump into Bina, who had stopped dead still.

"You have guest," Toto remembered, belatedly.

"Hello." Lefty Ryan stood across the room with his stiff cop's carriage, hat in hand, his dark suit looking more uniform than suit, his face coolly expressionless.

Bina ran across to him and wound her arms about his neck, sobbing. "Dad! Dad!"

His arm tightened around her, but his expression did not change. Sniffling, she wiped her eyes on his tie. "I knew you'd have to forgive me, Lefty—and congratulate us."

"Sorry. That's not exactly it."

She ignored the coldness of his tone and rushed on. "You're staying to dinner! We talked about having you to dinner on the way in, didn't we, Jerry?"

Jerry put down the luggage and advanced toward his father-in-law resolutely, if a little warily. "Yes," he said. "I'm afraid I got off to a bad start with you, sir, but—I'm going to do my best to change your opinion. And—to make Bina happy."

Before Lefty's flinty gaze, Jerry's voice trailed off, his proffered hand dropped. "I came around to tell you some new evidence turned up on the Crevellin case," Lefty's cold eyes moved from Jerry to Bina.

Bina stood very still, her breath catching in her throat. "New evidence," she said weakly.

Jerry's face tightened. "There was never any 'Crevellin case'," he said.

"There might have been if my daughter had done her job honestly."

"What do you mean, 'honestly'?"

"Told your aunt all she saw at those social functions."

"What new evidence?" Bina broke in.

Lefty swung around to her. "A piece of Mexican jade that looks like it fits the piece found on the floor of Clarissa's bedroom the night she was—the night she died."

"That silly jade business again." Without thinking, almost automatically, Jerry offered Lefty a cigarette.

Lefty waved the pack aside. "That 'silly jade business' is going to make it a case," he snapped.

"No!" Bina moaned.

"It was too big a thing to pass over," Lefty said tersely. "Jordon and I have never been satisfied. The cleaning woman swore it wasn't on the floor in front of the chaise when she swept that morning. Mrs. Crevellin didn't own any Mexican jade. Bina hadn't worn any of her bracelets that week. *Then who dropped that first piece of jade* in front of the chaise where Mrs. Crevellin was found? It was never cleared up, any more than the bump on the back of her head."

Anxiously Bina glanced over at Jerry, smoking furiously. "Please, father—"

Jerry crushed out his cigarette. "We appreciate your—continued interest in our behalf, Detective Ryan. But I'm still satisfied with the coroner's conclusion in regard to that. If you'll recall, my late aunt was alone that afternoon after Bina went home. It was Toto's afternoon off. The cleaning woman came only for three hours that morning. It seems far more plausible that she could have overlooked that piece of jade on the carpet than that anyone could have broken into the house, gotten past the gardener unseen, and left no

fingerprints of any kind. As to the bump, my aunt died of a heart attack that afternoon. She could have fallen trying to call the doctor."

"There was a phone upstairs," Lefty snapped. "She certainly wouldn't have started downstairs. Your doctor wasn't too happy with the verdict," he added darkly. "It was his private feeling that that bump on her head would have contributed to her death, but he hadn't thought her heart was bad enough to stop beating from just the shock of falling down some stairs."

"Who found the second piece of jade?" Jerry said. "Where was it found?"

Lefty's eyes glinted ominously. "I found it," he said. "Yesterday morning. *Down between the second and third flagstones of our front walk.*"

"That's fantastic!"

Lefty's gaze moved to Jerry. "And your marriage is going to be a big help," he said, with an almost savage bitterness in his voice.

Bina stood frozen, unable to believe what she had heard, helplessly staring at her father and Jerry, squared off like a couple of fighters, Jerry parrying, Lefty slugging.

Jerry said sardonically. "You've turned in the jade?"

"It's safe," Lefty snapped. "And the Chief will have it when he gets back from his vacation Wednesday—*whether anything happens to me or not.*"

"If you're trying to say—"

"I'm not trying to say anything, I'm saying it!"

"But this is ridiculous."

"Save your opinions. You'll have a chance to air 'em—plenty of chance—before this thing's cleared up." He strode across the thick carpet, stopping once before Bina. "Want to come home?"

Bina answered, feeling she was talking to a stranger in a horrible dream, "No, Lefty."

At the door, he muttered a last, harsh epithet before he slammed out. "Lobster thermador!"

Bina's fears melted during the crazy-quilt evening. Wonderous luxury of steaming bath and exquisite food. Fussed over by a solicitous Toto and a gay and gentle Jerry. Then suddenly choking on the lobster because it conjured up a vision of one of Clarissa's formal dinners.

Sharing the phone with Jerry to answer Marge Norris' welcoming call, which was followed by other calls from friends Marge had alerted. Exulting with him that Marge, one of Clarissa's close friends, had chosen to use her influence to ease them back into her—and Jerry's—crowd.

And then, between the glowing plans and warm chit-chat, stretches of frightened hopelessness. What lay beneath Lefty's grim warning? *Did he expect Jerry would be actually indicted for Clarissa's murder? And that she herself would be accused—*

Finally, in the privacy of their room, Jerry's smiling caress. "Thanks for staying with me."

She slid out of her robe, tucked the top of her pajamas into the pants, and did backflips. Try and cry doing backflips. Then she rolled back onto her shoulders, stretched slim legs toward the ceiling and did a fast bicycle routine.

"You haven't asked me," she said thickly, still standing on her head, "if I dropped those two pieces of jade."

Jerry was laying out his clothes for morning, placing the socks neatly beside the tie. "Are you kidding?" he said indulgently.

She stared at him, then lowered her feet to the floor and sat up to stare at him right side up. All evening she had felt he was covering up anxiety for her sake, but this was an awfully good job.

He grinned at her a little ruefully as he helped her up "Didn't you see through Lefty's trick?"

"Trick?"

"I expected something of the sort. But nothing quite so—brutal. You may have noticed, sweet, he doesn't like me. And the way I see it, it's not just a natural antipathy. It's more like a—well, an occupational allergy.

"A rich man can't endure a pauper son-in-law. A Professor abhors getting stuck with a ditch-digging relative. To Lefty's cops-eye-view, that piece of jade, that bump on the head, are unsolved clues, making Clarissa's death a possible murder. And me—since she was having me checked—a likely suspect."

"A murder suspect," Bina said, thoughtfully. "And a police officer couldn't *stand* drawing a murder suspect for a son-in-law. That may be it. I've never seen dad so wrought up. But I still don't see what trick—"

"The second piece of jade, of course! He found it so conveniently—where it would do us the most harm. You notice he *didn't* turn it into the Chief."

"But Wednesday—"

"He won't turn it in Wednesday either. Because there *is* no piece of jade. He wants you to lie awake worrying tonight. And tomorrow he'll make a bargain with you. If you'll agree to come home he won't turn the 'evidence' in."

Bina considered this in silence for a moment, her lips tight. "I've never known dad to deal under the table—or bargain—"

"You've never known him to lose a daughter to a murder suspect either. You'll see. When he becomes convinced we won't scare, he'll calm down."

His confidence was reassuring. Deliberately, Bina took refuge in it, drifting off into a half-sweet, half-troubled sleep. Sounds diminished and fell away, but she could still hear faint, arguing voices.

III

UNFORTUNATELY, in the hard light of early morning, the picture looked different. Jerry had left early for his office, and Lefty seemed to frown at her across her breakfast tray. Lefty's curt voice rang in her ears. "A man can't be half-crooked. A man is either crooked or straight."

Lefty had made a direct statement, a direct charge, with every appearance of sincerity. Could her father lie to her, even to get her back? Even the remote possibility that he had lied was very hard to accept.

She dressed quickly. A plaid skirt, a white, turtle-neck sweater. Rolled her shining coil of dark hair into its accustomed small circle at the nape of her slender neck.

Toto snapped off the sweeper as she passed him on her way to the back door. "I breeng your car—Missa Crevellin?"

"Don't spoil me, Toto. I couldn't stand it when you go back to Marge."

She went down to the car stalls where her small convertible looked presumptuous among the line of Cadillacs and foreign models. As she backed it carefully around in the handkerchief space and crept out the drive, she avoided looking into the yawning abyss of excavation at her left.

She found herself wondering if Toto felt jolted the way she did each time he called her "Missa Crevellin." It had been so terribly recently that he had called Clarissa that. Bina wished he could go back to calling her Mees Ryan. But of course he couldn't.

Lefty was in his usual third booth at Frascati's when Bina slid in opposite him. He looked up, not too surprised, and plainly relieved.

"I kinda hoped you'd remember my lunch hour," he said, patting her hand.

Bina lowered her eyes. Honeymoons were wonderful things. Marriages were wonderful when it was a marriage like hers. But not if it lost her Lefty! Somehow, she had to go back, and make up for all the weeks she had deceived him. Earn her way back into being his daughter again.

Lefty made it easy by coming right to the point with his usual, blunt ease. "Sure, honey, I know you didn't see this guy on the quiet because you *wanted* to. I expect you thought he was cruelly broken up, and you had to help him over a rough spot. You've always been like that. And pretty soon he couldn't do without you. So you married him."

Bina nodded, blinking back quick tears. "I hoped you'd call the hotel. I left the number in my note."

"I had it propped by the phone," Lefty admitted. "I probably would have weakened if I hadn't kept getting mad so often. And finally I found that piece of jade between the flagstones."

Bina took a sip of coffee to fortify herself, then let him have it. "Jerry says you didn't find any jade. That you're holding it over us so I'll agree to a divorce."

Lefty's eyes narrowed. "Not turn it in, eh? That's a neat deduction. Fits him to a T. You want to know how I got that boy stacked? You don't, but I'll tell you anyway. He figures things, just naturally, so they'll come out one hundred percent right for Jerry Crevellin."

"Please . . . you just don't know Jerry."

A waitress brought Lefty more coffee. He took the opportunity to dig into his inside pocket for an envelope with his name penciled across it. When the girl had gone, he tossed it across to Bina.

She opened it. Its contents was hardly a shock. Somehow, she had known it would be something like this. A report from the police laboratory, signed by the chief technician, whose signature she knew well. It said that the piece of jade, which Detective Ryan had turned in Saturday, had been tested thoroughly and was definitely, by rock structure analysis, identical with the supplementary piece in the Crevellin file. It would be turned over to the Chief when he returned on Wednesday.

"And how do *you* have it figured?" she asked quietly. "Do you think that I fought with Clarissa over Jerry, and left her in a rage that brought on her heart attack? And that I carelesly dropped a piece of jade from one of my own bracelets, and another piece as I came home?"

"I don't think you dropped that jade. I never said you did and I'm not saying so now."

She gave him a level look of battle. "Making it nice for yourself?"

Lefty laughed. "Sure. But if you had dropped it the night you came home from Clarissa Crevellin's, it wouldn't be there now. Luckily, I can prove that much."

Bina's relief was mixed with a rising bewilderment. "But who would want to plant a damaging piece of false evidence on me?"

"You don't know?"

"I don't, Lefty."

Lefty sighed, and tapped his coffee cup with an extended forefinger. "Well, let's go back," he said. "Remember the night you told me Clarissa had sprung the watchdog job on you?"

"Yes."

"You were mad, clear through. You said the woman was out of her mind and you wouldn't work for her anymore. You'd liked her

up to that point. Remember what she said?"

Bina was leaning across the table, held by Lefty's steady eyes. And, as though hypnotized, she saw the scene in the Crevellin study again in painful detail. Clarissa, immense and lumpy in her white chiffon robe, sitting behind her dead husband's enormous desk.

"I did think," she was quavering, "I could entrust my husband's business to a member of the family. I have so much work to do on my League Committee this year, you know, and on the Christmas charity drive. Especially, when Jerry knows the estate will be his some day. But if these things are *true*—"

"Bina, I heard it from a very intelligent friend. This Dennis Moresby is so smooth. He involves men like Jerry, who have money in their care, by promising to make them extra money for themselves on the side."

"But Jerry wouldn't—!"

"I hope not." Clarissa mopped her florid face with her lace handkerchief. "I sincerely hope not. And yet, my friend's husband was tossing away *her* fortune, and she blames Moresby. After all, fond as I am of Jerry, I must face it. He's hinted he was having some sort of trouble in his business in Boston when I offered to back him out here."

"I'm sure it wasn't *dishonest* trouble. And he's so terribly fond of you."

For an instant, Clarissa's quivering bulk quieted. "I always thought so," she said, her voice holding a sigh of wistfulness. But then her jeweled fingers began plucking at the desk blotter again. "But I can't shut my eyes to the fact that my friend thought her husband was fond of *her*. She didn't think he cared a fig about money. That's why he deceived her so completely in his treacherous scheming."

With a guilty start, Bina controlled her shudder as Lefty's hand closed on her arm. His sympathetic eyes were still boring into hers. "You're going to have to tell me, Baby."

Bina fought a compulsive impulse to lay the whole disturbing problem before him as she'd always done in the past. But this time she couldn't confide in Lefty. She just couldn't. This time, in spite of his stern code of dealing only with facts, Lefty was prejudiced. She couldn't explain to him how Clarissa, who was such a dominant clubwoman, could become jittery about business. He would use one case of jitters to forge a lethal weapon against Jerry.

She said, "Clarissa told me she wanted to be sure Jerry was not having secret meetings with Den-

nis Moresby. That was all, Lefty."

Lefty's lips tightened. He sighed. "Okay, we'll play it your way. Did Clarissa Crevellin have Jerry's secretary checking on him too?"

"Lorraine Danby? Oh no."

"Why not?"

"She—she didn't feel she knew her well enough."

"That the only reason?"

"Yes—yes, of course."

"Did the old girl have any special suspicions?"

"No."

"You were awfully riled up when you got home over a pretty normal attitude for a woman trying to protect her property."

Bina said with a sudden rush of honesty, "Jerry was so wonderful to her—thoughtful, affectionate. She had no right to suspcet him of any crookedness."

Lefty snorted. "You'd be surprised how thoughtful and affectionate a crook can be—especially to his victim."

"Dad. Jerry's no crook!"

"You didn't know it," Lefty said drily, "but you were in love with the guy then. That's why I tried to get you to walk out on the whole deal. But you didn't. *You didn't because you were afraid to let someone else check on him.* Wasn't that it?"

Bina winced. "You're hurting me, dad."

Lefty released her wrist, muttering absent apologies. But his gaze continued to bore into her. "I'm not saying there was anything out of the way about your falling for him. He's the kind of guy, maybe, the help always goes for. I can even see how you, being your mother's daughter, would try to keep peace between him and his aunt. But now his aunt's dead. Somebody who knows we're not satisfied about her death, is trying to frame you."

"What—what do you want me to do?"

"Go down with me Wednesday to the Chief. Call the shots straight. Tell him everything you know about Jerry Crevellin."

"I know he doesn't wear jade bracelets."

"It could be somebody who didn't like your marrying him. Or somebody who figured they could make a father hush things up—call off the blood hounds."

Bina sighed. "Maybe we should talk to Jerry."

Leaning sharply forward across the table, Lefty growled at her explosively. "Bina, snap out of it! I'll be the happiest cop in town if he's okay. You know that. But he married you too fast—almost like he was grabbing for a shield. Can't you get it through your head. If his aunt *was* standing in the way of something he wanted, it just could be *you're standing in the same place now.*"

Bina felt like a winded fighter reeling back from a series of wind-up blows. But she faced her father with flashing eyes. "You're being ridiculous, and you know it!"

Lefty's hard gaze fought hers for a long minute, then he acknowledged defeat with a heavy sigh. He pushed back his dishes and reached for the check. "All right, we'll do it alone. But if you change your mind, Baby, you've still got a home. And that city job you always wanted is open now."

She didn't answer or look at him.

He dropped an awkward hand on her shoulder. "Take care of yourself."

IV

IT WAS TWELVE-THIRTY by the time Bina got back to the apartment. There was a call from Jerry. She called his office. Lorraine Canby's crisp but friendly voice said, "Well, Bina! I mean, Mrs. Crevellin! You two really surprised us!"

"We surprised ourselves," Bina said.

"Best wishes! Just a minute, please—" While the girl answered the other phone, Bina shook off a sudden feeling of uneasiness. She reminded herself firmly that she had always liked and admired Jerry's secretary, who had come out with him from his Boston office, even if Clarissa had not.

So what if Jerry had taken Lorraine to dinner a couple of times during those weeks she had been checking on him? Why should she have mentioned it to Clarissa? Jerry had been spending so much time in the social end of his business, leaving Lorraine practically running the office. And Clarissa didn't want her even calling the house on the many evenings Jerry was there because she sounded "uppity—as if she owned both the office and Jerry". So how else could he plan the work of his office?

Abruptly Bina became conscious of Jerry's "hello". He laughed at her startled gasp. "Do you, or don't you want to speak to your husband?" he said.

"I'm just dying to, darling."

"Bless you. As long as we both shall live."

"How's the Hanlon deal coming?"

"About to explode. I'm having dinner with the son and his lawyer. How's that for a rotten way to spend our first real evening at home? If it wasn't so important I'd get out of it somehow."

Bina allowed herself a small moan of disappointment, but then said cheerfully, "Well, it'll give me a chance to get your pipe and slippers located. She had promised herself she would never try to

monitor Jerry's plans, as Clarissa had.

But when she left the phone, she had a sudden sympathy for Clarissa. Her day suddenly flattened out. Jerry was such a vibrant person. He could fill your life so full that when he was gone, you felt lost.

Toto served her lunch at one end of the long dining table, as he'd always served Clarissa. She exclaimed over his flakey rolls and crisp salad. She sounded, she thought in a kind of detached dismalness, a great deal like Clarissa. Pouncing with such bright restlessness on each detail of her household.

"The cleaner come thees morning," Toto reported. "He say he return thees afternoon, so if you have the clothes to send."

"Oh. Oh yes!" Clarissa, of course. She must unpack her clothes. Go through the closets. She had literally thrown them at the hangers when she and Jerry brought them from her house last week. She had drawers to fix. Relief welled up in her. She had so many things to fill in the day. Things she could think about, things to keep her mind from going off into unpremeditated, dark paths of the past.

Toto followed her into the living room with his tray of dishes. "Velly nice place here, Missa Crevellin."

With a slight shock, Bina realized she hardly knew what this place of Jerry's looked like. Last week when she brought her clothes, and last night when they arrived, she had been too full of her own uncertainties and decisions to see it. Now she followed the Oriental's admiring gaze to the tropical plants against gleaming glass walls, the deep cushioned, moderne-hued furniture, the recessed fireplace.

"It is beautiful," she said.

"You build a house soon?"

"We hope to."

"Velly nice."

There was only the glow of friendly joy on Toto's face, yet for an instant, Bina had the uncomfortable feeling he was seeing the lucky working girl who had played her cards right and was now reveling in her good fortune.

She hurried on into the bedroom, half amused, half irritated at her sudden sensitivity. So what if people did think she had married Jerry for his money? She hadn't. So it didn't make any difference what they thought.

She had sorted through her suits, laying aside two for the cleaner, when another and colder thought struck her. Jerry, she must face it, had no money at all except the income from his young brokerage business. It was Clarissa's fortune that made him a wealthy man. If people thought she was after Clarissa's fortune, or Jerry

was after her fortune, it might make a very grave difference.

Desperately she slid back the doors of Jerry's closet and sorted through his suits. Three of them could stand pressing. She was deciding what drawers to start straightening as she checked through his pockets, depositing the small accumulation on the lowboy.

There were plenty of drawers. She'd have to mark the ones she chose, she thought humorously, or she'd lose her lingerie.

A snapshot of a girl standing before a boat was in the pocket of a light-weight summer suit. The pretty face was familiar. Bina bent closer. The girl was laughing, her hair windblown. But it was the same slender nose with the delicately flaring nostrils, the same wide eyes, and full, curving lips . . . it was Mrs. Dennis Moresby.

With fingers suddenly trembling, Bina stared at the picture. Her mind desperately sought balance. So what! The Moresbys were friends of Jerry's. Dennis Moresby probably liked this snap and had given it to Jerry. Was that anything to break out in a cold sweat over? Maybe he had used it to scribble something on the other side. But the opposite side was blank.

Deliberately she dropped the picture and went on with her sorting. It lay on the top of the pile of odds and ends smirking at her.

Belligerently, Bina faced herself in the mirror.

"So Lefty did get through to you," she accused her reflection bitterly. "You're thinking there could just possibly be something to Clarissa's suspicions of the Moresbys. All right. Then ask Jerry about it. You don't need to tell him Lefty was talking to you today. He knows Clarissa pointed their pictures in the paper out to you, that you saw them once or twice briefly at those parties. Just ask him.

Lefty's voice was loud in the room. "Call the shots straight."

Toto knocked on the door. "Missa Crevellin say you like paper to see ad for house maybe."

"Thanks, Toto." It was like Jerry's comforting presence in the room telling her to calm down, keep her mind on their new life. She kicked off her shoes and curled up in the chair by the window with the paper.

But she didn't reach the ad section. Leafing toward it, she passed the sport page, and turned back to it for something her eye had caught in passing. A sailboat. And before the wheel, Dennis and Terry Moresby. Readying their boat, Jennifer, the caption read, for a year's cruise to the Galapagos, Papeete and other heavenly spots.

The doorbell rang, sending an electric shock through her. Lefty?

But Toto came in hidden behind a mass of roses arranged in a

bowl of glazed pottery, shaped and painted to resemble a chubby dog. The note read: "Pogo, our watchdog. Now all we need is the house. Pogo loves Bina. Jerry loves Bina.

Bina chuckled, then shuddered. Watchdog. Lefty had said Clarissa had used her for a watchdog. Carefully, she set the vase on the small table, rearranged the roses. She couldn't evade the thought any longer. To save her happiness and Jerry's, she was going too have to play watchdog once more. The plan had been evolving relentlessly in her mind, patterned after the stories she had coaxed out of Lefty all her life and remembered so vividly.

She looked up Dennis Moresby's number and called it. Told the maid she would like to speak to Mr. or Mrs. Moresby.

Terry Morseby's high, hoarse voice came on, tinged with a trace of sulkiness. "This is Mrs. Moresby."

"I'm Jan Criler, of the *Times,*" Bina said rapidly. "We want to do a feature article in connection with your trip." She tried to make it sound as if this was a break for the paper, and a bigger break for the Moresbys.

Terry Moresby said, "But Mr. Moresby gave an interview to the *Times* last week."

"I know that," Bina dissembled quickly. "But this one will feature you and Mr. Moresby, how you happened to buy the boat, consider the trip—how it has affected your lives."

"*That* I could tell you!" The sulky voice sounded away from the phone, repeating this joke.

Presently a man's voice came on. "Hello. You still there?"

"Yes."

"This is Dennis Moresby. "We'll be glad to give you an interview. Maybe you'd like to see the boat."

"Well—I—uh—" Before Bina could come up with the right excuse, Dennis Moresby's voice boomed graciously, "We'll pick you up at the main *Times* entrance at three-thirty. Okay?"

"Okay, And—thank you."

Not quite two hours. Bina stuffed the mound of odds and ends back into Jerry's suits and hung them back in his closet. She slid back the door of her own wardrobe and ran a nervous hand along her dresses. Luckily, her clothes were suitable. She chose a dark skirt, blouse and jacket. Tucked her horn-rimmed reading glasses ostentatiously in her jacket pocket, and rummaged through her suitcase for one of her old notebooks and pencils.

She completely rearranged her hair, accentuated the curve of her lips with a make-up pencil, made her eyebrows darker and wider. She looked, she thought, like some of the girl reporters who had come to get society items from Clarissa. She knew she'd be running a slight risk, of course. But the Moresbys

traveled in a different set, and were rarely in town. She didn't think there was much danger that they would penetrate her disguise and recognize her.

At the kitchen door, she paused to tell Toto if Jerry called, she had gone househunting. "And," she added cautiously, "I may not be home for dinner. If I find myself in the neighborhood of any old friends, I'll probably stop."

"Yiss, Missa Crevellin."

V

THE AFTERNOON WAS sparkling clear. As Bina drove swiftly along Wilshire, her tension eased. There was no longer any sense of shock at the thought of Terry Moresby's picture being in Jerry's pocket. Over the phone, the girl had sounded childlike and spoiled. She'd probably liked the shot of herself and had dozens made to pass out.

But Bina was glad she was checking out the Moresbys. Tomorrow, she could tell Lefty definitely just what connection Jerry had with them. And they wouldn't be dragged into it any further.

It was fortunate, she thought that the Moresbys had seen her only once or twice briefly at parties. And that she and Jerry had had no wedding pictures in the paper.

It wasn't, she told herself violently, that she was afraid to tell Jerry. It was just that she couldn't bear his thinking right now that maybe she didn't trust him.

In the newspaper morgue, she called for every possible article mentioning the Moresby's boat, or similar trips to Tahiti. By the time the Moresby's open sportscar slid up to the main entrance, she felt she could at least keep up with the conversation.

Terry Moresby slid over to the middle of the seat to let Bina in. She was a very pretty woman close up, Bina observed. Her graying hair was protected by a swathing of veils. Her sand-colored, silk suit was expensively simple, enlivened by a wide row of exotic bracelets of many-hued, semi-precious stones. But nothing so lovely, Bina observed, as Mexican jade.

Dennis Moresby navigated the city traffic with brisk impatience. "No use talking in a stupid town," he said, "when you can do it on a boat."

Terry Moresby said, "A poor excuse is better than none." She winked at Bina, laughing her sulky laugh. "Anything to get down on that boat."

Bina returned her smile. "Are boats a new love, or has your husband always been this way?"

"As long as I've known him," Terry Moresby said. "They had to custom-build our wedding ceremony, you know. 'Will you, Terice Bayles, take this man and *Jen-*

nifer, to be your lawful married husband and boat?' "

Dennis' rugged face relaxed in a grin. "She never stops yamming, but you couldn't hire her to stay at home."

Terry sighed, looking down at the jeweled spikes of her shoes, the persimmoned halfmoons of her pedicure. "Ten more days of living," she mourned. "Then it's trousers and dishpan hands."

Desperately, Bina tried to draw Dennis Moresby out about his brokerage business. But his mind was already ahead, down on the boat. Yes, he felt it was safe, leaving his office to shift for itself. He had a good man taking over. He called him at various points along the coast.

Bina decided to take the plunge. She said she had interviewed another Beverly Hills broker and his aunt not too long before. And she'd been shocked to hear since of the aunt's death. Did they know Mrs. Crevellin?

There was a distinct pause. Bina was sure she could feel an almost physical effort of the man and woman beside her to keep their eyes straight ahead.

Terry Moresby said, "Yes. We knew Mrs. Crevellin." Her voice sounded flat. She made a half-hearted attempt to warm it. "We were shocked to hear of her death, of course."

"Her nephew—what was his name?"

"Jerry," Dennis Moresby said. "He seemed very fond of her."

There was another brief silence. Terry Moresby broke it with elaborate disinterest. "Yes, I guess he was."

Bina let the talk flow back to the boat. She was angry at herself for being so stupid. Lefty would have had them talking of Jerry and thinking they brought him up. She had only assimilated enough of Lefty's technique to realize what an amateur she was at getting information.

At least, she thought, she had learned one thing. Whatever deal they had—or were about to have with Jerry—*if they had any deal*—had not been helped by Clarissa's death. Or had it? Was this the stiffness of fear?

Dennis signaled from the wharf, and the man on their boat brought the dinghy to pick them up. They rowed out through anchored boats to the *Jennifer.*

Terry was splashed, and she gave a scream of temper. Dennis said, "You shouldn't wear clothes like that down here."

"For ten more days I shall remain civilized," Terry said balefully. But she was the first up over the side of *Jennifer.*

Bina had a sudden struggle with herself not to show wide-eyed excitement. Except for the smelly fishing barges Lefty had taken her on, she had never been on anything afloat. This graceful craft,

with its shining brass and fresh paint was a place of pure enchantment.

Terry assured her it was a tub. She showed her everything on deck, and below in the tiny, stainless steel galley.

"Can you imagine cooking down here in a storm?" she groaned, "with the pans sliding and the food sloshing. And washing dishes in that sink afterwards. *Washing dishes!* You lie on deck and dream of dish washers and maids and bubble baths! Boats! Ha!"

She called up to Dennis's deck hand. "Frank! I want a new faucet down here! And did you get that leak fixed in the water tank?"

"How about some grub?" Dennis called down.

Terry tied an enveloping apron about her. With speed and skill, she opened cans, broiled bits of bacon-wrapped water chestnuts, added piles of anchovies, smoked oysters, cheeses onto a tray, surrounded them with English biscuits and crackers.

Bina carried the fragrant assortment up the steep companionway steps, marveling at Terry's sure-footedness behind her with the martini tray.

"It's a gift of goats and sailors," Terry grimaced. She called out, "Soup's on!" and they settled into long chairs to watch the dusk deepen over the water and the boat lights twinkle on. The *Jennifer* moved beneath them like a cradle.

"Who wants a city?" Dennis said.

Over the second martini, Bina managed to edge out a few facts from his torrent of plans. This was only their second long trip. They were rank amateurs. Except for that one long haul to Tahiti, they were week-end cruisers with the rest of the land lubbers.

"And it's Terry's fault," he finished. "We made the first trip with the guy I bought the boat with and his wife—"

"It wasn't so bad with another woman aboard," Terry sighed.

"We'll make better time without two women having to go ashore to buy out the shops at every port. But anyway, when this guy was transferred east, I sold his half to another fellow. But he had trouble over it and sold it back to me. Terry can't stand her own company, and she's so damn fussy about a crew."

"You have to be sympatico with every living soul aboard for a stretch like this, cramped on this tub," Terry snapped.

"I suppose you would," Bina agreed. The details of the trip were beginning to fascinate her. She pulled her mind firmly back to her own problem. "Your bracelets are so unusual," she murmured. "Did you get some of them in the native shops on your last trip?"

"Yes." Fondly, Terry sorted out each foreign-bought bracelet,

searching her memory for the port from which it had come.

"I have a small collection of Mexican jade," Bina broke in lightly. "I love it."

Terry Moresby's eyebrows arched incredulously. "You do?" She dropped her braceleted arm to her side as though closing the subject, and reached for her martini.

"Don't you—like Mexican jade?"

"No. I don't have any. None at all."

A chill touched Bina. The pretty girl opposite her was determined to drop the subject of Mexican jade. Why? Did it have too many memories?

Dennis Moresby, as though hearing the unspoken question, grinned across at his wife. "You used to like it well enough. We listed to starboard all the way down the coast carrying the damn stuff. Then all of a sudden, you can't stand the sight of it, and toss it all in the pot of some welfare drive."

"What drive? When?" The excited questions slipped out before Bina could stop them. Her embarrassed laugh was genuine. "I mean—" she floundered, "maybe I could buy up some of the pieces. I'm sure they were unusual and lovely."

"I don't remember who I gave them to," Terry said impatiently. "It was over a year ago. I'm sorry."

The tensing excitement in Bina died down into disappointment. "Oh well," she managed, "maybe I'll tire of mine, too."

An hour later, Frank rowed across to shore and, to Bina's dismay, returned with a huge hamper from the thatched restaurant. Its colored lights shimmered in a long rainbow out through the darkening waters.

"Nonsense," Dennis laughed away her frantic objections. "Don't pull that deadline stuff on me. You have to eat somewhere."

He raised their chairs several notches. Frank brought out a table. And to soft, island music they had caught in Papeet on their recorder, they ate Hawaiian chicken and iced, ginger-scented fruits.

Tranquil peace warred with tension in Bina, as she watched Dennis Moresby waving a hand toward the shoreline.

"And almost three million lunkheads live in houses."

If he were a sharp, underhanded operator, she thought dismally, his cover was too perfect for an amateur like her to pierce. How, she wondered with growing desperation during the next hour, could Lefty have gotten him to expose his methods of trapping victims like Marge's ex-husband and Jerry into losing money in secret, crooked stock maneuvers, when he wouldn't talk about business?

"I'm a seafarer by choice," Dennis Moresby said smugly to

Bina. "But my wife hates really long trips."

"I just hate to go alone," Terry flared. "If Jerry Crevellin had just had the gumption to *marry* that girl and—" She stopped so suddenly, her voice made a little hic-coughing sound.

Bina sat frozen, her arm with the wrist watch still held up beside the candle. "Jerry Crevellin?" Her words sounded small and cold like her body felt.

Dennis Moresby frowned across at his wife, quite obviously realizing that she had taken too many Martinis "Terry has just managed to break our promise of secrecy to a friend," he said. "As long as she's acted like it's a state secret, I'd better tell you—as long as it's understood it's strictly off the record."

"It's understood," Bina said.

"Well, Jerry Crevellin bought the half interest in *Jennifer* a year ago. He'd sailed a lot back in the Atlantic and was all het up about this boat. We planned that when he got his business in tighter shape, we'd do a lot of sailing together. Then he found out his aunt disapproved of boats. And when Clarissa Crevellin disapproved of anything, she went whole hog."

"So the weak-kneed idiot sold us back his half," Terry burst in, "without even telling his aunt about it as far as we know. And we had such plans for cruises for the four of us!"

Terry got the words up through her stiffening throat. "Didn't the —the girl Jerry Crevellin was to marry have anything to say about it?"

Dennis Moresby looked at his wife and said, "Ha."

"We can understand now why she didn't have anything to say," Terry laughed. "Jerry was real secretive about her. Never did tell us her name. Only that I'd get along well with her on a cruise. But it must have been this girl he married. And she was his aunt's *secretary!*"

VI

THE HANDS OF her watch said eleven as Bina turned the key in the apartment door. If her luck held out, she'd beat Jerry home.

But his briefcase was on the coffee table.

She tiptoed into the darkened bedroom, but even as her finger reached for the light, his voice sprang out of the darkness, blurred with sleep and sharp with exasperation. "Bina?"

She gave a startled scream, then switched on the light. "Darling! I'm sorry I woke you."

"Where in the world have you been?" I broke away early and came home—"

"And I was gone." Remorsefully, Bina sat on his bed, bent to kiss him. "I thought it would be a late one. Toto told you where I was."

"He said you had gone house-hunting." There was a curious edge to Jerry's voice. "I don't mean to be overly curious, but I thought the message a little casual."

She took a long breath and raised her head determinedly, relieved that Toto had forced her into the truth. Why shouldn't Jerry know where she had been? He'd understand why she had to check the Moresbys before the police insisted on doing it.

To her surprise, she heard herself saying instead, "Toto is a dear muddlehead. I told him I might drop in on a friend. I did—a very old and dear friend I knew in school. I didn't expect you so soon or I wouldn't have stayed so late."

Jerry's face didn't change, but it was as though he'd lowered some barrier between them. "I'd been thinking you'd ganged up with your father against me."

She caught him by his thatch of blond hair and shook him with playful violence. "You crazy loon! I love you. I'll always be on your side, remember that!"

When she crept into bed later, he was already asleep. She was glad. Her earlier excitement had taken its toll. She felt very tired and a little forlorn. *Had* she chosen sides? Of course she hadn't. She hadn't even promised her father she wouldn't tell Jerry about his turning in the jade. Jerry was still convinced there was no second piece of jade, or—as Lefty thought—that it wasn't going to be turned in. As long as he thought either of these things, he would not suspect she had been forced to check the one woman she knew who might have left it on her path.

And Terry Moresby hadn't.

Lefty was a smart cop, but this time he was off his rocker. He had, as Jerry said, a cop's-eye-view of the world, and he couldn't see beyond it. She could never convince him of Jerry's inborn, natural kindness. That instinct or solicitude, which he had turned upon Clarissa, and now upon her. She thought of the hundred of plans he had made for their lives during those short, ecstatic honeymoon days—plans for their home, their family, their vacations, all complete with details for her comfort, her happiness. Darling, darling Jerry. Hers alone . . .

Then through her drowsing, a sudden spasm of pain. This girl Jerry had mentioned to the Moresbys so secretly. This girl he was planning to marry. The one they were so sure was Bina Ryan. Her mind forced the thought upon her. *This girl was not Bina Ryan. Before Clarissa's death, Jerry had never looked twice at Bina Ryan!*

Bina was wide awake now. Her throat was dry and tight, her heart pounded crazily. Desperately, she chided herself. Was she losing her mind? How did she know Jerry hadn't looked at her? He'd told her

so, hadn't he? That he'd been hooked the first time he saw her. So what if he hadn't shown it. He was a gentleman. He wouldn't.

She had never in all her life had nightmares, or been afraid of the dark. But now she was afraid. Really afraid. She thought of crawling in with Jerry, whose breathing was so peaceful, so regular.

And then the feeling of terror abruptly increased. She seemed to feel his eyes open, burning into her in the darkness.

Bina woke to flooding sunlight. From the bathroom Jerry's baritone rose in joyous song above the hissing shower.

In another minute, he was coming in, toweling his hair, looking enormous in his white terry cloth robe and slippers.

"Top of the morning, Chipmonk!" He came over to sit on her bed, and pull her onto his lap. "I love you! Love me?"

She wound slim arms around his neck and nestled her cheek against the rough cloth of his shoulder. "Check with me later," she yawned.

"Do it now." He kissed her until she laughed and gasped under the exuberant pressure of his lips and arms. All the happiness of their lives together flooded back to her. Like a drink of potent wine, heady, stimulating.

He brought her a glass of orange juice. "If you feel like breakfasting up," he said, "I had Toto set us up on the balcony so we could count cars."

"Be ready in three minutes."

She washed, twisted up her hair in one smooth movement, and slid into one of the new housecoats Jerry had bought her in the little shop in Palm Springs. She laughed as she caught herself humming Jerry's crazy bathroom tune. She felt buoyant with love and eagerness. There didn't seem to be a middle way, she thought. Life was forlorn, filled with nightmares and misgivings. Or it was crazy, wonderful adventure. How could she choose anything but Jerry?

The whir of the electric toaster, the bowl of red roses on the patch of linen-covered table were small, domestic anachronisms on the smart, iron-grilled balcony. Below them, colored cars raced the curving boulevard.

Jerry tossed aside the morning paper as Toto pulled back her chair. "We're having scrambled eggs and kidneys," he told her. "I think you ran off a couple of pounds yesterday."

"You scared them off shouting at me in the dark," Bina retorted.

He reached over for her hand. "I'm sorry." His grin was apologetic and boyish. "I guess I was kind of half scared you'd left me. You're such a half pint, I pretend I'm taking care of you. But I'm not fooling anyone, am I? You're the stalwart of the family.

I lean on you. I knew that last night in the midst of my fuming."

"You're just lucky you're cute," Bina chortled.

"Eat your grapefruit." He released her hand. "Think how soon it'll be hot cereal." He mimicked, "Of course Mommy eats her cereal. Good, hot cereal!"

Breakfast was over too soon, and she was taking him to the door laughing with him, holding him with senseless banter, dreading to see him ago.

His eye was on the mantle clock. "I'll just have time now to give Lorraine a couple of letters that have to go out today before my lunch appointment," he said.

"Be home early tonight?"

"You bet. Have Toto whomp us up a banquet and lock you in."

"I'll be in," she laughed.

When he was gone, she hurried back to the kitchen. She relayed to Toto Jerry's order of a banquet for two tonight, adding, "I'll be gone for lunch. I'm going to look through more houses."

This, she told herself with guilty humor, was not too far from the truth. And, if Jerry called, he would chalk up the impulse of house-hunting to the cereal discussion at breakfast.

The doorbell broke into her thoughts. "I'm out," she instructed Toto hastily. She dare not run the chance of a long interruption until she had the job done she'd set herself today. Time was too precious. Tomorrow was Wednesday.

She escaped into the bedroom and listened through the door to Toto's mumbled explanations. Then, to her sharp dismay, she heard Marge Norris' good-natured, sharp voice in the hall.

"Nonsense. She's not out. Why Jerry just left as I came in. She wants to see me."

Bina stepped back into the hall. "Of course I do," she said.

"Darling!" Marge advanced upon her, crackling with radiant energy from her crisp, dark hair to the rapid tapping of her high heels, and looking as she always did, in spite of the full schedule of her days, immaculately and expensively groomed.

Even when she had been one of Clarissa's close friends and Bina, the secretary, she had called her darling. But now she added a hug. "It's monstrous, breaking in on a honeymoon," she cried, "but you know Meddlesome Marge. Toto, bring us a pot of coffee, that's my boy. We can chat in the bedroom."

Bina proceeded her in, smiling helplessly. Marge was so used to making herself at home at the Crevellin house, she was only proceeding according to habit. After all, as she had so often reminded Clarissa, she had really introduced Jerry to her younger crowd, fixing him up in business as well as society, keeping him content to stay out here. And when

you carried all that to its logical conclusion it really meant that she had kept him content out here for Bina. In simple justice it was only right she should have the same privileges here as at Clarissa's, and the same responsibilities.

"I had to come over," Marge was saying as she closed the door behind her. "I've been frantic about you two ever since I read the paper."

Her concern was so abrupt, Bina stared at her. "Paper?" she echoed blankly.

It was Marge's turn to stare pityingly. "You mean you and Jerry didn't see it?"

"No. What?"

Marge opened her commodious pocketbook and whipped out a small, clipped newspaper article, explaining it even as she handed it to Bina. "That fool police department—I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'd forgotten your father—has found some new evidence of some kind that apparently throws a monkey wrench into the coroner's verdict of accidental death."

Bina held the clipping in cold fingers. One paragraph slashed out at her. ". . . Captain Murray, who was back at his desk last night for the first time since his vacation . . ." So he'd come home early. He'd be sending someone for her today. This morning. Before—

Marge's voice stopped her as she was halfway to her closet. "Do you have any idea what this evidence could be?"

"No—yes. Yes, I do. A piece of Mexican jade that matches the one found in Clarissa's room. My father found it—on our front walk." Bina slid the zipper of her housecoat and stepped out of the garment.

"Oh, darling!"

Vaguely, Bina felt relief at the single note of sympathy in Marge's moan, "How ghastly for you! Do they have any idea who put it there?"

"No." With frantic haste, Bina moved down the line of her clothes. A dark suit, she thought. Something quiet she could get into quickly.

"Mexican jade, was it?" Marge's voice was clipping along at its usual swift pace. "I don't know a man who'd be caught dead with it. God, what a ghoulish thing to say! But it must have been a woman. Bina, I want you to listen to me."

"Yes, Marge." Bina buttoned the coat of her suit, snapped ear rings onto her ears and then pulled them off. She mustn't wear anything she could lose.

"You don't think Jerry killed Clarissa, do you?"

"Of course I don't!"

"Then quit sticking out your neck to protect him."

Bina caught her breath, evading Marge's eyes. "I don't know anything that—"

"I know what you know. I'm

afraid I started Clarissa on that witch hunt about Jerry, because my ex, Wally, had played ducks and drakes with my money and he was seeing a lot of the Moresbys. But since then, I found I was wrong. It was just a *woman* Wally was lavishing my money on."

Marge, I've *got* to—"

"Now all that sneaking off of Jerry's that bothered Clarissa was probably a girl. You know how determined Clarissa was about his marrying 'the right girl'."

Toto's knock rescued Bina. She brought in the tray of coffee and poured Marge a cup.

"Two lumps," Marge instructed, "with no cream. You shouldn't use cream *and* sugar. Cream is all right, or sugar. I know you felt it was innocent, and were trying to protect Jerry when you didn't even mention he'd always sat with the Moresbys at those parties. And I'm sure now they're harmless."

"They are, Marge."

"But this girl, whoever she is. She may not be so innocent. She may have thought marrying Jerry was pretty hopeless with Clarissa in the picture. I'd like to have that girl found. Because Clarissa was older, but still one of my closest friends. That's something I'll never want to forget."

Bina pulled her hat low over her eyes, collected purse and gloves. Then she faced Marge determinedly. "Marge, please believe me. Clarissa was my friend, too. If she was killed, I'll find the one who did it."

"It wasn't any girl in our crowd," Marge said. "Most of them were after Jerry, but none of them made the grade. That secretary of his guarded him like—" She broke off to stare at Bina abruptly. "That Lorraine was with him back in Boston, wasn't she? He sent for her."

Bina nodded dumbly.

"Clarissa never liked her. Always felt she was up to something."

Bina's fingers clamped hard into the soft leather of her purse. "Lorraine was out of town the week Clarissa—died. I'm going to find out why."

"Darling, you'd better let the police look into it. If she *did*—"

"I can take care of myself, Marge. And if Lorraine is in the clear, why should she or Jerry be dragged through this any further. I'll try to get the investigation stopped. Maybe the bracelet was mine. I got panicky and denied it."

"Now wait! You can't go off half cocked."

"I won't. You'll see. We'll work it out."

The ringing doorbell sent a charge of fear through her. Marge's eyebrows lifted questioningly. "The police?"

Bina could only stare, her lips whitening.

They heard Toto's feet padding up the hall. And Marge went into

action. She moved to the door with her swift, sure walk and whispering quickly to the passing houseboy. "I'll see him, Toto! Mrs. Crevellin is *not here!*"

"Yiss, Missa Norris."

Through a crack in the hall door, they watched Toto repeating the message to two policemen.

"I'll hold them till you get away." Marge whispered.

As Bina made her way stealthily across the kitchen, she could hear Marge's calm voice saying, "Good morning, officers! Did you want Mrs. Crevellin, too? Toto tells me she's gone house-hunting. Sounds gruesomely lengthy, still it's harrowing, and she might give it up any minute. We might as well wait long enough for some coffee. Toto, would you be a doll? Make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen, and I'm *dying* to hear about that new evidence."

VII

AS HER CAR slid out past the empty police car Bina's strained features relaxed a little. She'd have a good half hour before the two officers could escape from the spell of Marge's skillfully arranged hospitality. There was a hypnotic quality about Marge's managing. Even Clarissa had tired of it periodically, but always returned for more. Bina was lucky, she thought, to have Marge on her side. And she herself was lucky, for she had a good excuse now for getting Lorraine to talk. A new job opening she'd just heard about should be of interest to Lorraine and possibly loosen her tongue.

Her watch told her it was one o'clock when she was a few blocks from Jerry's office. She swung into a gas station and dialed. Lorraine's cool, deep voice said, "Jerry D. Crevellin, Company."

"Hi, Lorraine," Bina said, trying to sound gaily casual. "Has Jerry left for his lunch date?"

"Yes, he has—Mrs. Crevellin."

"Good. The name is still Bina. And you're having lunch with me."

"I'm sorry, Bina, but—"

"You can do those letters after lunch. This is terribly important, Lorraine."

"Well—"

"I'll pick you up in front of the office in—can you be down in five minutes?"

"All right."

They drove to an Italian place near Hollywood, where Bina was sure they wouldn't be interrupted by friends.

Against the avacado green leather of the booths, Lorraine's proud, small-featured face resembled a finely-chiseled cameo. A strange thought drifted through Bina's mind. Had Jerry been aware of Lorraine's beauty?

Over her guest's protests, Bina ordered chianti with their lasagna. "This is an occasion."

"Oh?" There was a startled, guarded glow in Lorraine's dark eyes.

Bina took a breath. She smiled at the girl across the table wryly. "Did you know I always envied you?"

As she had hoped, the words jolted Lorraine. Her voice warmed with surprise. "Envied *me?*"

Bina nodded. "The way you answered the phone. It—well, it gave Jerry's office prestige. The way you looked in the office, too . . . so glamorous. The way Jerry felt about you. . . ."

"The way Jerry felt about me?" The girl's vitality leaped out from behind a fast-lifted guard

This was the hard part. Bina forced her voice on to fresh depths of confidence, her eyes to a wider candor. "Yes—that his whole business revolved around you, depended on you."

"Oh." The dark head relaxed back against the green booth. The corner of the full lips lifted in secret humor.

"Just before Mrs. Crevellin's death, when you left town for a fortnight he was so concerned about you that his aunt teased him about it."

Lorraine's slim body had stiffened again. She picked up her chianti and sipped it, avoiding Bina's eyes. "I had the flu," she said shortly. "Jerry drove me out to my sister's." Her gaze flicked down to her watch. "You said something about an occasion?"

Bina laughed. "I'm sorry! I forgot how short a lunch hour is! I'll be brief. For years there's been a job—a city job—I've had my eye on. The woman was about to retire, then changed her mind. I took the secretary job with Mrs. Crevellin while I waited. Yesterday, I learned the job is open. I think I could help *you* get it."

For a minute, the dark eyes opposite flashed brooding shock. "Did you—mention this to Jerry?"

Bina managed a shaky laugh. "Heavens, no! He'd shoot me on sight for even thinking of it. But it's almost twice your salary, and a real executive spot. You could handle it perfectly. It's really a quite exceptional opportunity."

Lorraine finished her lasagna before she looked up again. Then she said quietly, "Thanks, Bina. It was nice of you to think of me."

"But you don't want it?"

Lorraine smiled. "No. My job with Jerry is not the top, maybe. But it's taking me where I want to go."

"Well—" Bina said, "I guess that's all that matters." While she picked up her change from the bill tray, Lorraine expertly brushed on lipstick.

"You're a nice gal, Bina," she said in her cool, deep voice. "But I don't want to be an executive. Just an executive's wife."

Jerry's car was in the parking

lot when Bina dropped Lorraine off at the office.

"I won't mention our secret to Jerry," Lorraine promised. "And thanks again."

Bina didn't care right now whether she mentioned the city job to Jerry or not. Just so Lorraine kept so busy for the next hour that she didn't have time to consider what Bina might be doing.

By freeway, it took only half an hour to get out to Alhambra. While service station attendants filled her car with gas, Bina checked the local phone directory. This was a long shot. If only they listed phones by 'Frances and Charlie', with a cocktail hour informality.

Her finger moved with trembling eagerness over the page. "Was it Babson? Babor? . . . "It stopped with a jolt of certainty. "Babcock! That was it. She was sure. Babcock, Aline . . .Babcock, Bret . . . There was only one Babcock, Charles. She wrote the street address hastily in her memo book. The attendant gave her directions on how to get there when she signed her gas card.

She turned north from the freeway, checking the dashboard clock. She could do it, and still not be late for dinner with Jerry. After last night, she had to be home on time. Providing, she amended, with a sudden feeling of panic, the police allowed her to have dinner at home tonight.

But if this *was* Lorraine's sister, and she found out what she hoped to find, she could handle the police.

She brushed a blowing curl back from her eyes, and was surprised at the coldness of her fingers. It was lucky, she thought wryly, that Marge hadn't come along. Marge would be blowing up a storm over her not going straight from lunch to the police. Marge would be saying, "Don't you know a gauntlet when you get it in the face?"

But *Lorraine's last words weren't a gauntlet.* They couldn't be. Lorraine wouldn't have uttered them with that intent unless she was determined to wound and be hateful. And Lorraine didn't hate her. Bina was sure of it. The girl was in love, all right—with someone she knew through Jerry's office. So naturally she wanted to keep her job there. But it didn't have to be Jerry!

The sight of Charlie Babcock's home gave Bina hope. It was on the outskirts of town—a three-room affair set far back on a couple of acres of ground to make room for several family-size, excursion trailers that were displayed with *For Sale* signs on them under the scrawny walnut trees. It didn't look, Bina thought, as though Lorraine's meticulousness ran in the family.

A heavy-muscled, shirt-sleeved man pulled himself up from a lounge chair beneath one of the trees, and approached Bina's car when it turned into the drive.

"Lady," he began, with the unmistakable accent of salesmanship in the jovial tone, "you turned in the right drive. This is your lucky day."

"I hope so," Bina said.

"I'm gonna show you the neatest little job on—"

"I want to see Mrs. Babcock."

He stopped in mid-sentence, dropping his hand from the car door he had been gallantly opening, to give a disgruntled nod. "Francie? She's in the house. Drive up further to make room for customers, please."

The screen door squeaked open promptly and a plump young woman, in crushed gingham house coat invited Bina in. It was plain she was delighted with visitors, regardless of their business.

"Gosh, you look real smart. I wish I was selling something on nice days like this. I offered to trade places with Charlie, but Charlie's no dope."

"He almost sold me a trailer before I could get by him," Bina said, returning Francie's smile.

"He does real good with the things, you'd be surprised," Francie carolled. "Two, last year, and then we took the third and went around the country, saw more places than I ever saw before—all the National parks and New York City, I'll never be happy living in one place again. Charlie put in a phone for me last week, but every place I want to call is long distance, seems like, and you can't really start talking without mortgaging your land."

"No, you can't," Bina agreed and found herself wondering how so loquacious a woman had ever gotten into the same family with Lorraine.

Almost as though she had caught the thought, Francie bubbled on. "My sister now, in Beverly Hills—you know what it costs to even start saying anything to her? And she's so ridiculously careful, she'll never sneak one on her business phone. Honesty is nice, but it's not as though her boss would care or even know the difference. He's loaded. And he thinks the sun rises and sets in Lorraine. Have you had your lunch."

"Yes," Bina said. "Thank you." She opened the leather insurance folder she had found in her glove compartment. "And I have another appointment that's rather urgent in Los Angeles." She pulled out a pamphlet, praying that Francie's loquaciousness wasn't a cover for a curious and suspicious mind.

Apparently it wasn't. Francie gave only a fleeting glance at the brochure, waiting with polite impatience for Bina to state her busi-

ness, so that she could go on unburdening herself.

"It's your sister I want to talk to you about," Bina said. "She's taking out a health and accident insurance policy."

"Lorraine is? Well, forevermore! She didn't tell me nothin' about it. Not a word. But, of course, I hardly ever see her now, and when I do, seems like there are so many things to get caught up on."

"Yes," Bina said. She was beginning to feel panicky. Could she ever lure Francie to the point? An could Francie keep her mind there long enough to answer her questions? She said firmly, "I'm checking on her health record."

"Oh, Lorraine's as healthy as I am. You'd never know it to look at her, and I don't blame you for wondering."

"It's just routine," Bina said hastily. She consulted the pamphlet, careful to hold it out of Francie's line of vision. "In December of last year, you took care of her for two weeks. December first to the fifteenth. Are you prepared to confirm as a witness her statement that her ailment was influenza? And that she was only moderately ill—"

Francie was blinking above her sociable smile. "What in creation are you talking about?"

Bina grasped her pencil tighter, and tried again. "The company just needs a witness to the fact that your sister's illness last year was a virus infection. Since you attended her I'm sure you must know whether it was or not."

Francie's laughter rang out. "I guess you think I'm awful dumb," she said. "But honest, I haven't got an idea in the world what you're talking about! Lorraine didn't have flu last year. December third is my birthday, so I ought to know. She wasn't here. We'd just got back a week or two before ourselves and—"

A gasp broke into her words. "Oh, now I remember! Lorraine *did* come out here a couple of nights before—I guess it was the first. Her boss drove her out. But if she thinks I'm doin' any swearing to a big company that she *stayed* here, or that I nursed her for flu when I didn't, she's mighty mistaken!" A touch of angry color had crept into her plump cheeks.

Bina said curtly, "I don't see why she would put down that she had the flu if she didn't."

"Well, just between you and me," Francie exploded, "she had her reasons. Bad ones. She's got herself into more boxes than you could shake a stick at for that good-for-nothing. And it looks like she'll go right on doing it."

Bina listened impatiently. Francie was talking fast enough now, and to the point. But she wasn't making sense. Bina had to make her explain before she remembered she was giving away family secrets!

She said severely, "My company does not like fraud."

She forced herself to look stern.

Francie gave an exasperated snort. "Oh, my sister's not trying to cheat your company. "She just had to fly back east to the sanitorium that week to see that poor, alcoholic blob she has for a husband."

"Husband!" Bina was horrified by the startlement in her own voice.

Francie stopped short, staring at her. "You mean my sister used her single name to the insurance company, *too?"*

"Yes—yes, she did," Bina murmured, relieved.

Francie shook her head, frowning unhappily. "Charlie says I'm always getting things screwed up. But this would have come out. Lorraine's so smart in some ways, I don't know how she can be so dumb in others. Hanging on to that no good bum. It's on his account she's getting this health insurance, see? To pay his bill if she folds up. That's why she's out here now, slaving away for his old partner—just to hold that no good's job for him. And if you ask me, the whole things a waste of time. He'll never keep a job again."

Her rising indignation overcame her better judgment. "I'm going to call Lorraine right now and tell her what a mess she's got us all into!"

"Oh, no!" Bina cried, "don't do that!"

"We'll have this out once for all. She made a bad mistake when she thought I'd start sneaking and lying for her!"

Bina grabbed her arm desperately. "Don't worry, Mrs. Babcock! I can work it out. You just forget it!"

But Francie shook her off. "And I ought to reverse the charges!" She was moving angrily toward the phone, when Bina gave up and headed for the door.

"Give me Crestview six-eight —" Bina heard as she walked rapidly back to her car. To her sudden consternation, she saw that a car had driven into the driveway behind her, blocking her path. Charlie was leaning over the door, already launched on a jovial harangue.

Bina stepped on the starter, and backed gently against the car's front bumper, rousing the two men from their conversation. She leaned out to shout cheerily, "Could I get out, please?"

Charlie leaped back obligingly, and was shouting instructions for backing to his prospect, when the house door slammed.

"Charlie!" Francie's voice was sharp with command, and Bina stayed frozen, her hands clenched on the wheel, her eyes on the car behind her moving so slowly out toward the street.

"Charlie!" Francie was closer,

and there was a frantic belligerance in her tone now that seemed to Bina to be shrilling, "Stop that woman!"

But Charlie called back as he ran toward the street, "Keep yer shirt on, Francie. There! You're fine, lady. No one coming! Back right out!"

Miraculously, the drive was empty behind her. Charlie's arms swung with her as her car backed into the street. He was waving goodbye to her as Francie reached her husband's side, talking excitedly.

VIII

WITH DETERMINED restraint, Bina kept herself from pressing her foot to the floor as she headed back to the freeway. She was safe, she told herself firmly. By the time Francie had gasped out her story, it would be too late for Charlie to get Bina's car number. If he started pursuit, her car could outrace his trailer.

After a mile or so, she relaxed. Charlie would not take his wife's account too seriously. He'd think she just hadn't understood what Bina was there for. If Francie wanted to call the police, he'd be against it. Why advertise how she got everything mixed up?

And, with the danger of being held at the Babcock's ended, Bina spirits suddenly soared. She was going to make it home before Jerry, all right. *And she had her answer!* The simple—unbelievably simple—answer to the one thing that really had frightened her.

Lorraine did not love Jerry! Lorraine had no reason to kill Clarissa because she stood in the way of her marrying Jerry—or to frame Bina, herself, for murder.

The little car sped back over the speedway now with a contented hum. Everything Lorraine had said at luncheon made beautiful sense when you added to the picture an alcoholic husband, who had been Jerry's partner in Boston! It also made it clear why Jerry could never explain Lorraine to Clarissa or the "trouble" he'd had in his Boston office. Clarissa hadn't approved of alcoholics any more than she had of boats. But Jerry wasn't letting his old partner down. Sympathetic Jerry. Wonderful Jerry!

Tonight she could tell him what she had done—if she was lucky—before the police got there. Then they'd explain everything to Lorraine, so she wouldn't be upset over the business with her sister.

And, as for that silly jade business, she would go through her bracelets again. She might have missed the culprit that had dropped the broken pieces at Clarissa's and at home, and started Lefty off on his wild crusade, which was really only injured pride rebeling against having a

possible murder suspect for a son-in-law.

She breathed in the good sea air with relief and a warm gratefulness as she drove the last curving mile to the apartment. Everything was going to be all right now. She had carried the thing through and it had come out the way she knew it would.

Swinging into the driveway she maneuvered expertly along the narrow strip of concrete beside the white slab of the building, and back into her car stall. She fairly ran up the back stairs.

But in the kitchen, she stood suddenly still, moaning softly, "Oh, no!"

It was definitely Marge's fine, Italian hand. A couple of silver shakers were hers. And a few dozen of her initialed glasses were among the confusion of bottles, lemons, oranges, cherries, olives, ice cube trays and caterer's boxes of hors d'oeurves that littered sink and work table.

Numbly, Bina moved on into the darkened dining room and stood unnoticed, watching the gay and familiar scene. It might have been 'Cocktail hour at Marge's'. The same crowd. Toto beaming as he wound his way dexterously among them with his tray of glasses.

Bina's eyes sought out Jerry. He was beside Marge in the vortex of the hilarious group, that seemed to be welcoming Hal and Jan Edwards.

Marge was declaring between shrieks of delight, "Hal, you were divine. A consummate ham!"

"And that cop gave you a real grilling," Jerry grinned.

Jan Edwards murmured, "I only hope they didn't follow us here."

"There she is!" It was Marge who had seen Bina. She dashed over to pull her into the midst of the group. "Darling, there was an officer here again this afternoon, waiting to haul you in. I called Hal from the kitchen phone, and he rang us back. He said that you and Jan had gone to a movie, he didn't know which one.

"We put the cop on the phone to hear. And he gave up and left. Isn't it wonderful! I mean, just like in mystery books. I do like to see those cops get slapped down—or at least, disappointed—when they go around rattling sabers, making it ghastly for you and Jerry just because you got married."

Jerry said, "You were so late, we were afraid you *had* been picked up."

Silence crackled around Bina suddenly while they waited for her response. She still felt numb, and a little incredulous. "It was—nice of you," she managed weakly.

It was humorously inadequate. In the shock of anti-climax, Bina tried again—and to her horror,

heard herself lashing out at Marge, "But my father is still on the police force!"

Racing for the bedroom, she could hear Marge's contrite wail. "Me and my big mouth! I *always* forget—"

Bina shuddered as the bedroom door slammed behind her. She hadn't meant to say that either. They'd think she was in a frightful mood. She must *be* in a frightful mood. She stood in the middle of the floor, arms crossed and pressed tight against her body to control her trembling. And then Jerry came in behind her.

"Well—" he said disapprovingly.

". . . that was quite an exhibition," she finished for him through chattering teeth.

"Marge was just—"

". . . trying to be kind. I know. I know. And I'm glad she got the police away, because I have to—*we* have to—"

Jerry's arms closed around her. "We have to go on back to the party," he said gently, "and explain."

She turned to fling her arms around his neck and cool her hot face against the smooth weave of his suit. Everything was all right now. She struggled hard against the quick relief of tears, until finally she could talk.

"You see, Lefty *did* turn in the jade," she cried, "so I *had* to see the Moresbys, and they told me about the boat. And I found out why Lorraine lied about going to her sister's to recover from an attack of the flu. And now, before the Chief picks me up—"

She was standing alone now. Jerry had withdrawn his arms and stepped back. He was frowning at her. "So you've been playing cops and robbers—with my friends," he said quietly.

The numbness was back again. She stood helplessly, watching his tight face until anger released her. "It looked as if your friends had framed us for murder!"

"No one has framed us except your father," Jerry said. "That scare headline in the paper Marge showed me tonight was just another step in his plan of forcing you to give him some names, so he can really work up a case."

"That's not true!" She was screaming and couldn't stop. "Lefty's no monster! Do you think he'd drag me through a murder trial just to get my marriage annulled?"

"Yes. And I think he'd enjoy sending me up on circumstantial evidence!" Jerry seemed suddenly to realize that his shouting could easily be heard in the next room. He lowered his voice, but did not moderate his anger. "It makes no sense—trying to pin something on Lorraine! You and Lefty are not dragging her into this mess!"

Bina moaned miserably. "Just what do you want to *do?*"

"Sit tight. Call Lefty's bluff. Let the thing blow over. You look as if you'd been run down by a truck. Powder your nose while I go out and make our apologies." He gave her a hard imitation of a smile, dropped a cold kiss on her forehead, and was gone, closing the door with determined quietness.

Bina swayed. She sank down on the edge of the bed, her thoughts in a turmoil. She was having those queer shocks of vertigo she had felt a couple of times on an unfamiliar street when a glimpse of a familiar skyline had convinced her her sense of direction had betrayed her.

She'd been running so hard, so fast . . . *Was it in the wrong direction?*

Marge opened the door far enough to poke a man's hat through the aperture, and toss it in.

Bina laughed weakly. "Come in and beat me some more, Marge. I deserve it."

"How groveling can you get?" Marge shut the door behind her and breezed in. "I'm just lucky you aren't the shooting kind. Darling, I do know what a hideous thing it was, dragging in the crowd on you—of all nights."

"I'm tired, Marge—confused."

"It's so important for you to get off on the right foot with them. I thought if they were in here helping you, instead of somewhere else listening to these stupid rumors . . ." She was rummaging for powder and a comb, bringing them over to Bina.

"Thanks, Marge. I do look like a wreck."

"You've been busy. Did you get the dope on the lady?"

"Yes. I found out she'd lied about being at her sister's in Alhambra the week of Clarissa's death. I also found out where she actually was at the time. It had nothing to do with Clarissa."

"Are you sure? If she had her eye on Jerry, as Clarissa thought, she must have realized she'd never get him and a fortune with Clarissa alive."

"No—no, Marge. She wasn't after Jerry! She's married!"

"Well, what difference does that make?" Marge asked.

For a stunned moment, Bina stared at the air in front of her. Then she spun around to the mirror and began a fast repair job on her face. Her vertigo was gone. A surge of furious energy possessed her. "Marge, I've got to see Lorraine before the police pick me up. I know it's all right. But I have to talk to her. Please help me slip out."

"Well—I think it's a foolish thing to do and—okay, okay." She abruptly acknowledged defeat. "I'll have Toto back out your car."

On her way to the door, Marge paused. "I have a better idea. Listen—"

She went out quickly, leaving the door ajar so Bina could hear

her good-natured shout to the crowd.

"The party moves on!" she informed them in a barker's loud tones. "There'll be a special supper served in the dining room of the Beverly Hills Hotel in one-half hour! There'll be dancing, there'll be drinking, there'll be gaaaaaaaity! Don't rush, folks! Step right up for your hats and coats!"

During the general hubbub of departure, Jerry came up behind Bina. "Ready, sweet?"

Marge had followed him in. "Bina and I are coming along after we've done the phoning for the reservations," she said. "They can be preparing for the gang while you're on the way down."

"I'll stay and drive you."

"You will not!" Marge snapped. "You're the host, and you'll get them herded to the tables, Buster, or half of them will end up at the Beverly Wilshire."

She urged, pushed, wheedled, and eventually, Bina heard her triumphant yell as she shut the door on the last of the gang.

Marge met her at the door with a cocktail. "Drink this. Pull yourself together," she said. "It will take them a few minutes to sort themselves into their buggies. While they're jostling and crowding they won't see you making off."

Bina gulped the martini, realizing that if it would stop her nervous shudders, she'd get a lot further with Lorraine Canby. Gratefully, she felt the release of raw nerves as the strong liquor warmed her.

"I'll do the phoning," Marge said. "You make your call fast, and I'll wait for you in front of the hotel, so we can go in together. No one will ever know you left the party. Now what's the ghastly hotel number?" She was dialing as Bina went out through the kitchen and down the back stairs.

IX

TWILIGHT HAD changed now to thick darkness, and Bina felt her way carefully down the unfamiliar stairs. Halfway across the parking space, she ran into the fender of her own car. Marge had remembered every detail, as usual, in her elaborate planning. Toto had backed her car out and swung it partially toward the drive.

She reached into the dashboard and turned on the headlights. They flashed across the flimsy barricade into the yawning excavation, making it seem almost in front of her. Nervously, Bina opened the car door and tested the emergency brake before she climbed in. Everything frightened her suddenly. If she could just get through tonight.

She had one foot raised to enter the car when a man's hand closed on her arm, jerking her

back. Another hand slid over her mouth, smothering her cry.

She struggled violently, feeling the uselessness of the exertion. The man pulling her back was iron-muscled, relentless. She heard his sharply barked order, "Okay! Hurry it up now!" more as a rumble against her than a voice.

A second man grabbed the purse from her hand. She could hear his fingers expertly rifling through its contents. It snapped shut again, and he moved past her to the car. By the light of the dashboard, she saw his arm reaching in to put the key into the ignition lock. In mounting terror, she watched as he pressed the starter and then, as the engine came to life with a roar, the accelerator.

Every muscle in her tensed to combat the next move of the man holding her. *She knew now why the car had been swung around facing the yawning horror of the excavation.*

The man at the car door turned on a flashlight. In its beam, she could see him adjusting the small, pebble-like block around the accelerator. The drone of the engine rose to an even more vibrant roar —stayed that way as the man moved back. These were no amateur murderers. Bina knew of the block trick. There would be no way of kicking it out in the split second between the time they tossed her into the car and it went hurtling through that barricade!

She didn't wait for her captor to make the first move. In a convulsion of terror, she struggled frantically to free herself. But his arms clamped like steel bands around her, cutting off her breath. He began to drag her . . . and the old vertigo was back, making it seem as though he were moving her away from the car instead of toward it!

Dimly she saw the man at the car make his final move. One hand on the brake button, one on the gear. Then everything happened together. He leaped back—and the car shot ahead, plunging, with a splintering sound, through the barricade.

For one terrible instant it tilted in midair. Then, with engine roaring into a strange death crescendo, it left the ground behind, and followed the curving arc of its lights until everything was swallowed in the sudden, sickening crash from the depths of the excavation!

The steel-firm arms around her dropped away. The words of her captor were no longer a mere rumble against her, but a voice that she instantly recognized. She swung around with a startled moan. His hand closed on her shoulder.

"You all right, Baby?"

She whispered back dizzily, "Yes, dad. But—"

"Up those stairs fast then. And quiet. It would be a shame if

we've wrecked that car for nothing!"

The other man was Sergeant Ames. He said tersely, "Okay."

Stealthily but swiftly they felt their way up the narrow, steep stairs, and across the service porch to the empty kitchen.

Sergeant Ames turned a warning glance at them from his post by the partially open dining room door. He gave Lefty a go-ahead nod. Cautiously, they crossed the kitchen to listen at his shoulder to a series of faint clicks. Someone was dialing the phone in the front hall.

Joe Ames exchanged a silent look with Lefty, then edged noiselessly through the door into the darkened dining room. Bina and Lefty followed, as Toto's excited voice shrilled from the front hall.

"Plice? I make report, please! Ac-cident! Bad ac-cident! Terrible! Lady killed! Come, please!"

He gave the address in a dithering singsong, and hung up with a last plea for haste.

Bina glanced at Lefty, then Joe. They were making no move to go on, just waiting tensely.

Now Marge's emotion-charged voice relaxed them. "Well done, Boy. Get down there and check now, before the crowd—"

The ringing phone cut her short. "Wait a minute," she called to the houseboy. They heard the click of a lifted receiver. "Hello?" Marge's

voice changed to a frantic wail. "Oh, Jerry! Darling! It's happened! It was horrible! Really horrible!"

Bina's knees buckled. Lefty's strong arm went around her, supporting her, but his fingers tightening on her wrist warned her to be silent.

Marge's voice went on determinedly. It had become a little less hysterical. "Don't feel too badly, darling! She was working for the cops. That's why she married you—she *told* me! Isn't that gruesome? Said she had it all sewed up—you and Lorraine!"

Bina's strength returned in a sudden hot rush of protest that drowned all reason. "That's a lie, Marge Norris!" she screamed.

Instantly, all was commotion. Lefty's arm dropped from around her. He and Joe Ames were stiffly alert as Toto raced around the corner of the hall, his round face blanched with fear. Marge was right behind him.

Lefty's voice broke the heavy silence. There was a droll edge to his curt tones. "Touching, Mrs. Norris. Sounded real touching."

Toto's arm made a lightning movement. Joe Ames was on him in one fast lunge. He slammed him back against the wall, and gripped his wrist, twisting it until he cried out. A knife went clattering to the floor.

Lefty said, "You may as well carry on through, Baby. Frisk her. You know just how to go about it."

Miserably, Bina stumbled forward. So Lefty knew she had been playing cops and robbers, too. She ran light searching hands down over Marge's dress. Words came back to her from their old, childhood games. "No hidden weapons, Chief."

Marge had recovered her breath and temper. "Well, isn't this cozy!" she flared.

"As soon as Jerry shows," Lefty said coldly, "we'll go down to the station."

There was a screaming gasp. Joe Ames had grabbed Toto in a sudden attempt at flight.

"Get hold of yourself, Toto," Marge glowered at him. "There's no reason you should be scared of a cop."

"Not even if the jade pieces came from his watch charm?" Lefty asked blandly.

"No! No!" Toto shrilled. "I no have watch charm!"

"The cleaning woman remembered different today," Lefty said. "She saw it on your bureau—along with all those stubs from the Caliente tracks."

A hissing gasp of dismay was draining the last color from Toto's grey face. He began a singsong of shrill despair. "I no kill Missa Crevellin . . . I no plant the jade on Missa Bina . . .!"

"It was your afternoon off the

day Mrs. Crevellin died. Why did you sneak back in?"

"Missa Norris, she pay me to call for time downstairs."

"To call for time—" Lefty's frown broke into an expression of shocked admiration. "My God, that's it!"

He wasn't making any more sense than Toto was, Bina thought dazedly. "What's it?" she demanded.

"Why the phone company swore there'd been no receiver off the hook. We knew Clarissa's fall could have caused her death. But there were things that added up to fear. She'd dropped one slipper, her glasses half way across the room. Knocked over a small table in the hall . . ."

He snapped at Toto harshly, "You scared her, after you'd plugged the downstairs line into the time recording. She wasn't able to dial out on her own phone, so she tried to make it to the downstairs phone. She stumbled—or her heart wouldn't take it."

Abruptly, Toto broke out of his listening trance. "I no scare her!" he screamed. "Missa Norris, she called Missa Crevellin! Say Missa Bina want to marry Missa Jerry. Put something in Missa Crevellin's medicine—"

Marge's voice cut in furiously. "Toto, you poor maniac! What an imagination!"

"Did you give Mrs. Crevellin medicine that day, Bina?"

"Of course. I did every day."

"If you're cherishing the thought that I killed my closest friend," Marge whirled on Lefty, "just say so. And you'll lose your badge. When a police officer makes an absolutely unfounded accusation—he's heading for trouble."

Admiration flickered again in Lefty's eyes as he returned her gaze. "You are a manager, aren't you, Mrs. Norris?" You weren't trying to kill Clarissa Crevellin, probably. You were just trying to scare her into getting rid of Bina—*after Jerry confided in you that he was falling for Bina.* You had to nip that in the bud, didn't you? Because Jerry Crevellin was the reason you dropped your husband so fast.

"I doubt if it bothered you too much when your little game proved too much for Clarissa's heart, because you weren't too sure she would even go for your marrying her pet nephew. Even if you promised to help her keep a curb on his side investment tendencies.

"We have a few facts and witnesses, too," he went on grimly. "You see, somebody paid the switchboard girl downstairs to check on Bina's calls. And Toto got lazy and put in a couple from the apartment instead of the phone booth downstairs. This girl was a conscientious little cuss, and she came to us."

A line of white was forming slowly around Marge's well-cut

mouth. Her voice leaped out hoarsely. "The lousy, little sneak!"

The front door banged open. Running steps sounded through the apartment rooms. Then Jerry burst out into the hall.

For one crazy lurch of her heart, Bina watched him unsure of where he fitted into this sudden pattern of horror. Half expecting him to go to Marge Norris . . .

But his eyes passed Marge and stopped on her. "Bina."

She was crying when he reached her. She went on crying, burying her cheek deep in the hollow of his shoulder, feeling the jolting of his body with each gasping breath, hearing his hoarse, heavenly whisper, "Are you all right, sweet?"

"Yes."

"Bina—if anything had happened to you—"

Then suddenly the joy, the peace came to a sudden end as Lefty's hand clamped down on Jerry's shoulder.

"No!" Bina lashed out at her father in furious reflex. "You haven't got anything on him!"

"I'll get something," Lefty's curt voice held a strange note. As Bina stared at him, he added, "A medal, maybe. After we got together on things, he did a first rate job of straight man this evening while we let Marge play out her hand." Lefty nodded at Ames to take his prisoners away.

Bina's bewildered eyes turned back to Jerry. "You—*knew* it was Marge tonight? You *left* me with her?"

"It was a lousy trick," Jerry agreed.

"Among a half-dozen other lousy tricks," Lefty conceded. "But this guy looks out for you, Baby. Before he'd play along on this one, he made me explain just how I knew you weren't involved in murder when I turned in that second piece of jade."

"How did you know?" Bina gasped.

"The flash flood."

"In January?"

"Sure. If you'd dropped that second piece of jade on your way home from Clarissa's that last night, I couldn't have found it two days ago. Marge Norris wasn't hep to our canyon or she'd never have planted that jade where she did. She'd have known that flood took everything but the front porch, and I hauled in dirt to fill around every one of those flagstones."

"I should have thought of that, too," Bina moaned. "Lefty, I think I'll give up my badge."

"Guess I'm stuck with her," Jerry said to Lefty.

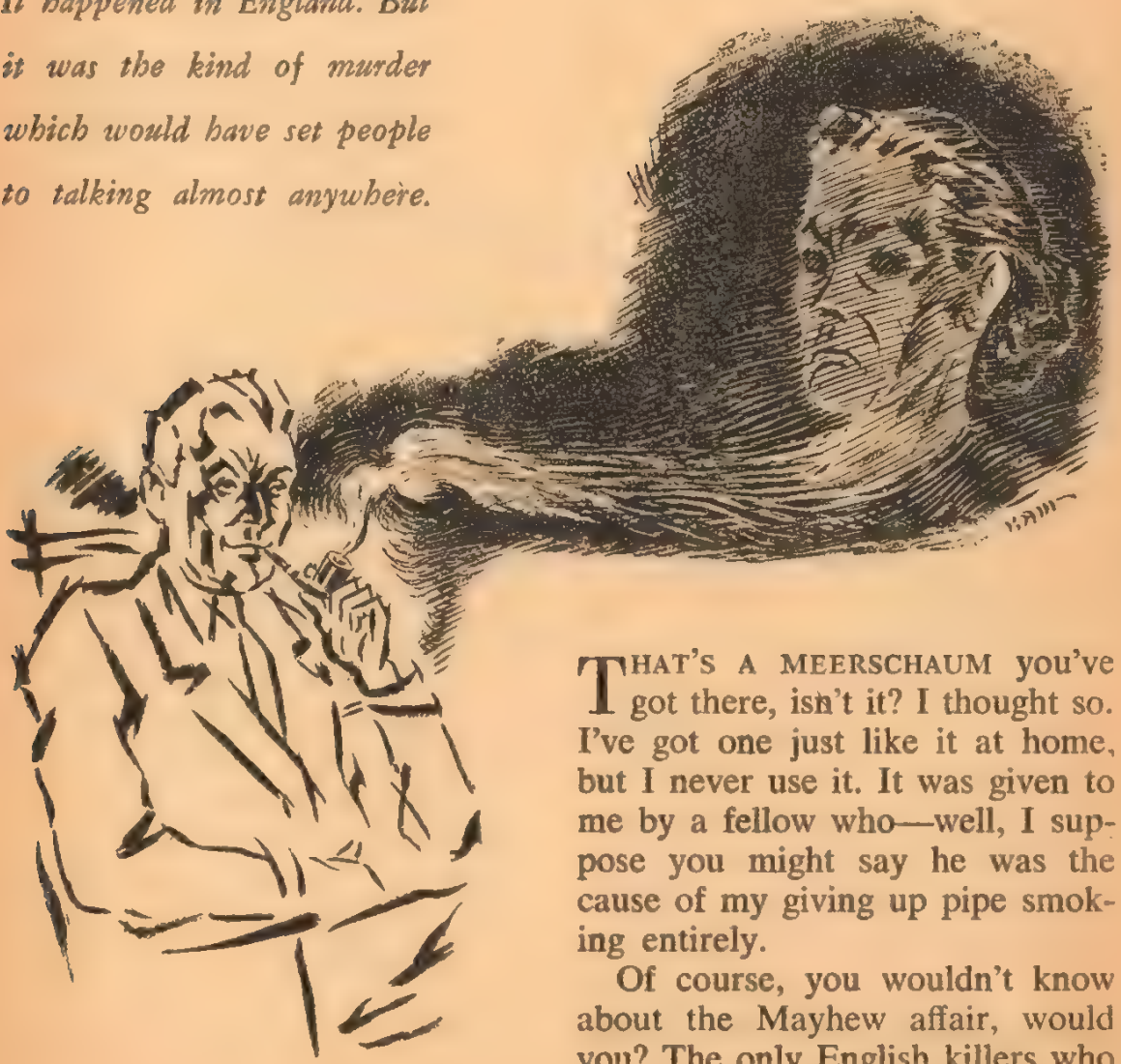
"Yeah, you might as well keep her. She's no good to me."

A bursting warmth spread through Bina as she watched the slow grin of comraderie exchanged between the two men. She wiped the last traces of tears away with a shaking hand. "A couple of schmoos," she jeered blissfully.

A DISTINCTIVE FLAVOR

by LEN GUTTRIDGE

It happened in England. But it was the kind of murder which would have set people to talking almost anywhere.



THAT'S A MEERSCHAUM you've got there, isn't it? I thought so. I've got one just like it at home, but I never use it. It was given to me by a fellow who—well, I suppose you might say he was the cause of my giving up pipe smoking entirely.

Of course, you wouldn't know about the Mayhew affair, would you? The only English killers who land in our newspapers are people

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like Heath and Haigh, multiple murderers with a flair for mutilation or acid baths. They are described as monsters and make good copy, I suppose.

There was nothing monstrous about Walter Mayhew in outward aspect. I first met him during the war when I was American liaison officer with a British occupation outfit. He was stocky, mild-mannered, had a slow smile and was never without a pipe. Neither was I in those days and the mutual addiction strengthened our friendship. We lost touch when he left the army but I met him later on in England. He was married by then and living in a seedy Teddington villa. He wasn't happy.

"My wife is a witch," he said when we paused outside his favorite pub, the Ace of Spades. "One of those women who can't love. They have to *own* you. Know what I mean?"

I nodded, puffing on my briar. His appearance had changed noticeably since I'd last seen him. His face was thinner, paler. Gray streaked his hair. "Maude lost me long ago and doesn't like it." He smiled faintly. "She says I think more of my pipe collection than I do of her. She's right, too. It makes for better company. Or a kind of refuge, maybe."

I changed the subject and we talked about pipes and tobacco. He told me he was making some experimental attempts to grow his own. This surprised me for I didn't think the climate or soil suitable. "There are difficulties," he conceded. "But some chaps are doing it here and there."

He described his pipe collection. "I'd like you to see it," he said. Then he added with a scowl. "But Maude would create a scene if I took you home. She drove all my old army pals away." I wondered why he had ever married her and he seemed to read my thoughts. "If I hadn't been such a damned lonely fool."

When I saw him next he was exultant. "She's gone for the weekend. Up to Liverpool to stay with a bedridden sister. I'm free until Monday." He was like a small boy given an unexpected holiday. "Now I can show you my pipes."

We gathered three flagons of ale at the pub and set out for Walter's home.

You wouldn't call the neighborhood shabby but an air of genteel decay seemed to hover over it. Drawn, dark brown shades transformed the windows into closed eyes, as if each house was intent on keeping its own secrets. Walter's was near the end of the block. He fitted his key into the lock with an eager impatience I found myself sharing.

Everything in the Mayhew home was oversized as if the aim was to smother life. China ornaments cluttered up an excess of tables, the carpet was furrily

thick, the wallpaper a colorful horror of formless flowers. Before the window a huge aspidistra blotted out daylight. I'd already decided whose tastes had dictated the choice of furnishings. With a single word and a gesture, Walter confirmed it. "Maude" he said.

Her likeness dominated one wall, in an enlarged enlargement, hideously framed, from which she glared at both of us. Once she might have been handsome. Now the lips were thinly cruel, the eyes contained oppression. Walter gazed at the portrait for several seconds. Then he turned its face to the wall.

He led me to the basement, crossed to an oaken closet and unlocked it. Two built-in blue lamps snapped on at once. He chuckled at my admiration. Walter's pipes were no mere collector's items. For one thing, they were friends to solace him when Maude became unendurable. But they also formed, on a quality basis alone, a most unusual treasure, exquisitely set against a black velvet drape, each pipe captioned with date and place of origin.

Two walrus-ivories from Siberia flanked a crimson pottery Ashanti bowl fashioned as a crocodile's head. An eighteenth-century Dutch clay with a sixteen-inch stem was encircled by delicate French porcelains and rich brown meerschaums. A high-breasted amber nude, bowl flaring from between her shoulder-blades, stared haughtily at a pair of Bali fetish pipes. An assortment of briars, meerschaums, bamboos and clays surrounded a squat, tiny-bowled opium pipe. Walter took it from its bracket.

"Made from an infant's thighbone," he explained. "Seventeenth century. Probably by Chinese tribesmen but I'm not sure. Fascinating, don't you think?"

He went on to show me the large box of prepared soil in which he had planted his tobacco seeds. "When they reach a good height I'll transplant them in my back garden," he explained.

It was a pleasant evening we spent, drinking, talking, and slowly reducing a bottle of passable sherry he had brought back from the army and kept from Maude. I left him standing on his doorstep, a rather forlorn figure, and only after turning the corner did I hear his door slam as he went inside to await Maude's return.

Shortly afterwards I had to cross the Channel for an indefinite stay and I didn't know when or if I'd see Walter again, so I journeyed to Teddington to make my farewell. It was Saturday, Walter's pub night. He didn't show up at his usual time, but I waited patiently, sipping warm beer and chatting with the Ace of Spades' affable landlord.

Walter arrived quite late. His face was drawn. Instead of his cus-

tomary pint of beer he ordered Scotch. When he gulped it down I noticed his hands were trembling.

"She wouldn't let me be," he muttered. "I returned her insults at first. After a while I gave up but she wouldn't. She followed me to the basement and kept shouting." He passed a hand over his face. "I went into the garden but she was there, too. *She wouldn't let me be.*"

When he heard that I was leaving England, his lips began to tremble. The value he plainly attributed to our friendship moved me.

"Soon as I get the chance I'll come by again," I assured him.

"You might not. Listen," he stood up and squared his shoulders. "I'd like you to have one of my pipes. Kind of a souvenir. Come home with me now and—"

I protested—less, I'm afraid, from a reluctance to diminish his collection by a single item than from a strong disinclination to meet Maude. I kept the reason to myself but Walter, suddenly defiant, said, "The hell with Maude. Anyway, she may have gone out." He held up a hand. "I insist. We'll have a goodbye drink at my place."

We rode the bus. He talked cheerfully all the way but I knew he was praying Maude wouldn't be at home. So was I.

Our prayers were answered. She had left a card propped on the mantelpiece which Walter read aloud. *"You are not fit to live with. I despise and hate you. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."*

Walter laughed. I hadn't really seen him laugh before but now he threw back his head and laughed. "Hope to God she means it," he gasped. Then he laughed some more and was still laughing on his way to the cellar for the last of the sherry. Then he was silent. A loud cry like that of a scalded animal arose suddenly from somewhere downstairs. It ended in a torrent of curses. I ran down the stairs to him.

"Look . . . oh, my God, look, will you?" His voice broke. "See what that—that—see what she's *done*."

A ghastly display of spite confronted me. The closet lock had been forced, the velvet drape torn out, the pipes scattered. Several were chipped. The stem of the Dutch clay was snapped, three bowls crushed by a frenzied heel. It must have taken Walter half a lifetime to gather this proud store and now he knelt amid its ruin, almost sobbing with anger and disbelief.

I took his arm and helped him to his feet. "I know how you must feel. I'm really sorry, Walter."

His eyes blazed. "If she comes back, if she ever comes back, I'll—"

"Better relax," I interrupted.

"I want to leave you in a better mood than this."

But there was fury in his eyes when I left and he clutched the wreckage of the thigh-bone pipe with a trembling, white-knuckled hand. On the way out I told myself that if Maude had any sense she wouldn't show up here in a hurry. But I had barely turned the corner, my step slowed by an autumn fog, before a woman brushed past me, headed in the opposite direction. I caught only a fleeting glimpse of her face but hadn't I seen it before, clumsily framed on Walter's wall? I couldn't be certain.

IT WAS A year before I saw Walter again. I knew that it would be the last time, for I was on my way home to America. He looked like a new man, buoyantly content and living alone.

"She is in Liverpool with her sister," he told me when I thought it politely proper to ask. "She'll never worry me again, thank God."

"You mean she isn't coming back?"

"She never has and I don't think she ever will." He got up and strutted about his living room. "Bit of a change in the old place, what?"

He had certainly improved it. Bright new carpets, laden pipe racks, fresh coats of paint had worked wonders. The aspidistra and Maude's huge portrait had vanished. In the basement he showed me the flue he had built for curing his tobacco. The post-war curtailment of tobacco purchases from America had forced many Englishmen to experiment in home cultivation. Walter was well advanced. His tobacco leaves were healthy-looking specimens, stacked in tightly bound bunches. Out in the garden, more grew within a carefully roped-off plot.

Later we sat and smoked. He was eager to hear my opinion of his product. "Got quite a tang," I told him. "But it's pretty good."

It was, too, although it lacked the smooth coolness of a professionally prepared leaf and there was a pungency, a harsh biting quality, which took some getting used to. But soon I was smoking pipeful after pipeful with great relish. My evident delight in the product pleased him.

It was much later, after Walter's drinks and perhaps an excess of smoking made us both drowse, that his words fretted in my mind. *She never did come back.* Hadn't I seen her stalking through the fog that night? Still, she might have thought better of it, knowing how Walter must have felt following her insane slaughter of his pipes. She could have paused at the door, turned and gone away again. She must have, if it was really Maude whom I had seen. And if Walter was telling the truth, of course.

Next morning we said goodbye for the last time. At the door Wal-

ter said, "Hold on a minute. I've got something for you."

While he was away, the postman had pushed a letter through the mail slot. I retrieved it and handed it to Walter when he returned, carrying a beautiful meerschaum which he pressed upon me. Then I left him, the pipe cool in my pocket and a crazy little puzzle worrying my brain. For the letter had been addressed to Maude Mayhew and my eye had caught the postmark too. It was Liverpool.

Walter was arrested six months later.

As I said, the trial wasn't reported in our papers but the landlord of the Ace of Spades kept me informed and sent me local press clippings. A neighbor had grown suspicious during Maude's long absence and, disbelieving Walter's explanation that she had gone to her sister's, traced the woman's address and wrote. Maude, replied her sister, certainly was not in Liverpool but at home in Teddington with her husband. Occasionally they corresponded although, it was added, Maude's letters had been uncommonly brief lately. Maude's excuse for this, her sister went on, was a frequent fatigue which kept her letters short and, no doubt, accounted for the shakiness which had crept into her handwriitng.

The neighbor went to the police.

Walter admitted writing the letters to Liverpool in a simulation of Maude's handwriting and it seemed obvious to the police that his only reason for so doing was to maintain the fiction of Maude's continued existence—in other words, to conceal her departure. Why? And where was Maude?

They addressed the questions to Walter who responded politely with a confession of murder. "After she had been gone some months," his statement read, "I got a letter from her asking for a reconciliation. But she wouldn't come near the house before meeting me. She needed to know I wanted her back first. She asked to meet me at—" He named a nearby Thameside village where the tryst was kept. They strolled along the river bank until after dark.

"But she hadn't changed. She was soon calling me filthy names again. I lost my temper, we struggled, she fell and hit her head on the stone. I got frightened so I pushed her in the river."

He volunteered to show them where it happened.

When dragging operations in the area failed to disclose Maude, it was assumed that she had drifted out to sea. Walter was brought to trial, however, this not being the first time a murder charge was sustained in the absence of any trace of the victim. But the prosecution's case, not very strong at the outset, was further weakened by

Walter's quiet-voiced account of his unhappy marriage.

When he told of Maude's brutal attack upon his pipe collection a murmur of sympathy arose from three members of the jury known to be pipe smokers. Several of Walter's neighbors gave evidence of the provocations he had suffered and the trial ended when the Judge heeded the jury's mercy rider to its verdict of "guilty" and sent Walter to jail.

Public interest soon died and when, some months later, a female body impossible to identify was washed ashore in the Thames Estuary, only a three-line newspaper report linked it with the Mayhew case. All this did was to settle the consciences of an uneasy handful who might still think Maude was not dead, that murder had not been proved.

It was almost ten years later that Maude's true whereabouts came to light—in fact, not long before the liberalization of England's penal laws and Walter's own impeccable behavior during imprisonment effected his release. I got the news from the faithful Ace of Spades landlord. The Mayhews' old villa had been torn down to make way for a widened road. Workmen digging up the weed-choked remains of Walter's little tobacco plantation found bones which were speedily identified as human.

Clearly, Maude had gone home that night. Still in the grip of rage, Walter impulsively struck and killed her. He had, after all, admitted to such. But his next move was dictated by a more subtle impulse, one which lifts his somewhat hackneyed method of body disposal into the realm of pure irony.

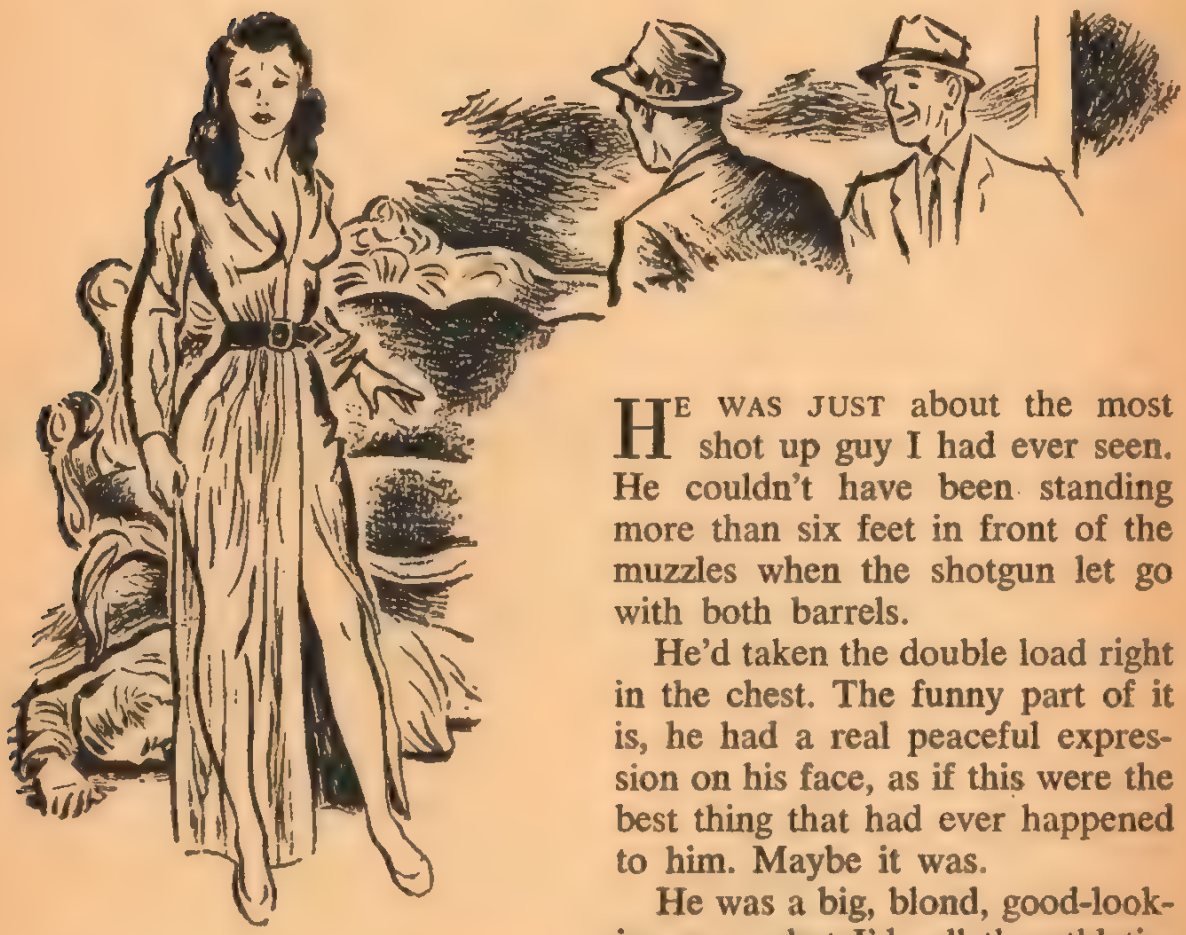
Or you might describe it simply as an experiment in fertilization; which I can testify was successful, although it was the memory of my too-eager sampling of Walter's tobacco which drove me off pipe-smoking.

That his tobacco crop, along with his pipes, had been Walter's prime concern was I think emphasized by his invented story of the Thameside incident. Anything, he must have felt, to keep heavy-footed bobbies from trampling and poking over the plants he had tended so carefully that season.

The last news I had came, not from the Ace of Spades, but from Walter himself. It was written on stationery headed Mayhew's Pipe and Tobacco Mart, Piccadilly, W.1. Business was good, I gathered, although he doesn't go in for domestic cultivation any more but stocks up on popular Virginia brands. One thing I'm sure of, though. None of them will have the distinctive flavor of the leaf which Maude so effectively, and posthumously, nourished.

NEVER TURN YOUR BACK

By LARRY HOLDEN



Kenny was a hard cop to figure out. He had a murder to untangle . . . not a sexy redhead's love life.

HE WAS JUST about the most shot up guy I had ever seen. He couldn't have been standing more than six feet in front of the muzzles when the shotgun let go with both barrels.

He'd taken the double load right in the chest. The funny part of it is, he had a real peaceful expression on his face, as if this were the best thing that had ever happened to him. Maybe it was.

He was a big, blond, good-looking guy, what I'd call the athletic-type wolf, and the bedroom he was stretched out on the floor of, he had no business getting well-acquainted with in the first place, if you know what I mean. In other words, he had asked for it and, brother, he

had gotten it in spades. The kind of spades they dig graves with, I mean.

He was dead about six hours when me and Kenny Riordan walked in there at eight that night. Me and Kenny is what you'd call a team on account of when you try to figure out a homicide, somebody's got to have brains, and I ain't no Einstein.

This red-headed dame was sitting on the sofa, and even though she was scared stiff, she was just about the sexiest looking tomato I ever laid eyes on. She was wearing one of those white nylon things that did to the old-fashioned bathrobe what the atom bomb did to the bow and arrow, and man, was she loaded in all departments!

Kenny pulled over a chair and sat down and started talking to her real soft and quiet. Kenny's a smooth worker and a hell of a handsome guy. You know that kind of Irish—tall, black hair, blue eyes, et cetera. If he was in the movies, it wouldn't be Rock Hudson's puss you'd see up there in technicolor.

"We realize this is a terrible shock, Mrs. Sloan," he said, schmoozing her, "and I hate to bother you at a time like this. But if you can calm yourself, it would be best to give us the details while they're still fresh in your mind."

Little by little he warmed her up and after awhile she sat there looking into his face like he was reading poetry to her, and here's the story we get from her—

This guy Andresson—that's the stiff—had been trying to make her on and off for months. So this night he walks in, and she's getting dressed for dinner in the bedroom, and the next thing she knows, he's making a pass at her. According to her, she wasn't having any, and there they are rassling to and fro in the bedroom, and all she's got on is panties and a brassiere, and who walks in but the husband, a guy with a terrible temper. She passes out cold and when she comes to, there's Andresson all over the rug and the husband gone.

"I'm sure it was an accident, Mr. Riordan," she said, giving him the big eyes. "They must have been fighting over the gun. Lew wouldn't shoot anybody on purpose."

"Okay, sister," I said, real tough. "That was a nice little story and I enjoyed every word of it. But now let's have the facts."

This is just an act, see? I'm supposed to get tough, then Kenny bawls me out and tells me to beat it, and this gives whoever it is the idea that he's a friend of theirs and before they know it, they're telling him things they wouldn't write in their diary.

She turned as white as an unfried bagle, and Kenny snapped at me, "That's enough of that, Gene!"

"Enough of what? Fairytales like we just listened to?"

"I said that's enough! Beat it!"

I said, "You're the boss," real huffy, and walked away. But I had a funny feeling that this time he meant it. He really sounded sore, and I thought maybe I had done it wrong.

I poked around the house, and off the kitchen, there's this little room, and there's all kinds of guns up on the wall, and over on the bookcase there's a big silver cup, and Lew Sloan turns out to be the state pistol champion of 1956. Brother! That guy Andresson just didn't have good sense.

Later on, Kenny called to me, and when we left, the dame went to the door with us. To me she was an ice cube, but with Kenny it was a different story.

"You've been very kind, Kenny," she said to him in a throaty voice, giving him the big eyes again. "Very kind."

"Not at all, Lura," he said, looking back at her. "If I can be of any help, just let me know."

As we walked down the lawn toward the car at the curb, I said, "For Pete's sake, Kenny, you ain't falling for that tomato, are you?"

He turned and took a swing at my jaw, and if he hadn't slipped on the grass, I'd have been spitting teeth for a week.

I jumped back out of the way before he could wind up again. "I'm sorry, Kenny," I said. "I didn't mean . . ."

"Nuts!" he said, real sore. "Let's get to work."

He walked up the sidewalk and I followed him. I tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't even answer. I didn't know what to make of it. I just couldn't believe he was falling for a dame like that. I mean, that stuff she tried to give us about Andresson and trying to fight him off et cetera. This wasn't football. There weren't no uncompleted passes in her league. Then I thought, the hell with it.

We poked around, but we didn't find out very much. There were only the two houses on the block and the people next door weren't home and the neighbors across the street was the ball park. But three blocks away was the gas station, and the attendant told us that Lew Sloan had bought a tankful a little after six, and had acted real funny, his hands shaking, dropping his money, and all that.

"Like he was drunk or something," he said. "I asked him what was the matter and he yelled for me to mind my own damn business, and shot out of here like a bat out of hell."

That was just about all we got anywheres.

Lura gave us a handful of pictures of him, and we passed them out to the papers, and had a flock of readers printed, and got the usual false alarms from jerks who were almost positive they had seen Lew Sloan in Philly, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and points north, east, south, and west.

A week passed, and we were still on the same dime—and with Kenny, I was still behind the eight-ball. At first I tried to make it up with him—hell, I liked the guy—but it went on and on and I couldn't get to first base, and finally I thought, the hell with you.

Then this Saturday night I was in the *Drop Anchor Inn* down by the river with this dame I know, and we were dancing to the juke box, and back there in the corner booth, who do I see but Kenny and Lura. There were a couple drinks on the table in front of them and they were sitting side by side so close you couldn't have wedged a finger between them even if you were a midget.

And while I was watching them, she lifted up her mouth and he kissed her, leaning down into it as though that was all he wanted to do for the rest of his life. And when I saw that, brother, I really blew my stack.

I took my dame back to the bar and said to her, "Put it on a stool and keep it warm, baby. I'll be right back."

I walked over to the booth. Kenny saw me coming and stood up, giving me a silly grin. His hair was mussed and there was lipstick all over him.

"Hiya, Gene." He flapped his hand at the booth. "Siddown, siddown. Buy y' drink."

I started. "You damn fool . . ."

He smacked me. His fist couldn't have moved six inches, but when I opened my eyes, there I was down on the floor among the cigar butts and chair legs, and my dame was sloshing my face with a wet rag and not caring how she did it, either. Boy, was she sore! Half the gin mill was standing around looking down at me over her shoulder.

"Now if you're finished making a holy show of yourself," she snapped, "I hope you'll be gentleman enough to take me home!"

I got up and looked around. Kenny and Lura were gone. I took my dame by the arm and she pulled away from me and marched out with me behind her. Every face in the joint watched us go, and there wasn't a friend among them. Brother, I was in the doghouse all round. I took her home, but I had sense enough not to even try to kiss her goodnight. I didn't need anymore pokes in the snoot.

The next day the Chief had me up on the carpet.

"What's this with you and Kenny Riordan?" he asked.

"Nothing, sir," I said.

"You tried to pick a fight with him last night."

"Yessir," I said, but I couldn't tell him about Kenny and Lura. "I had a fight with my girl and took it out on Kenny."

He bawled the hell out of me and said if Kenny hadn't spoken up for me, I'd be on thirty days suspension without pay.

"Now for God sake," he yelled

at me, "get out there and see if you can help him clean up this Sloan mess and stop acting like a damn fool!"

I walked out with my ears on fire. I went into the detectives room. There were a couple of the guys standing there talking, and when they saw me, they turned their backs. In their book, I was a muckheel. I was bigger and heavier than Kenny. I should have picked on a guy my own size. I didn't have to be no mind reader to see what they were thinking.

By now, it was over ten days and still nothing on Sloan. He had gone into a hole and pulled the hole in after him. I didn't see much of Kenny, but I knew he was spending every minute he could with Lura. I saw them together a couple times, once at another nightspot when they disappeared outside for an hour and he came back with more lipstick on him than she had.

When they got back to their booth, they fell in another clinch, and I walked out before I flipped my lid again. She had her eye on me all the time, but he didn't know that anybody else was alive but her. I never saw a guy so gone on a dame.

And that's what started me thinking about Sloan. He was just an ordinary guy. He worked from eight to five, forty hours a week, and you couldn't call him a guy that knew his way around or had contacts. Then all of a sudden I remembered what I had thought about Sloan going into a hole and pulling the hole in after him. I mean, the very words.

Him going into a hole, specially.

Lura didn't have me fooled. She was a beautiful dame. Marilyn Monroe didn't have a thing on her but Arthur Miller. And furthermore I knew damn well she had been shacking up with Andresson and didn't give a damn about Sloan. Let's say she even wanted to get rid of him, but didn't do anything about it till he blew Andresson all over her bedroom.

Okay. So Sloan knocks Andresson off and she gives him that song and dance about Andresson attacking her and he believes her, but at the same time he knows he's got to get the hell out of there or it's the chair. He loves her. Let's get out of here, he says. Okay, she says. So he runs down to the gas station and fills up while she's supposed to be dressing and packing.

He goes back, and when he walks in the door, she points a gun at him and pulls the trigger, drags him down in the cellar and puts him under the coal pile, and when me and Kenny walk in, she gives us that business about passing out. So now she's making a play for Kenny, so that when she gets him good and hooked, he'll help her get rid of the stiff in the cellar and have police protection at the same time. A very nice set-up.

But I was the guy that was going to clobber it!

I waited till about ten that night when I was sure her and Kenny would be out somewheres, and then I took the car and drove around the side street a block away from her house. I had a pickax and a shovel with me, in case I might have to do some digging in her cellar, and went around the back way, coming up to her house through the empty lot behind.

The house was dark, so I didn't bother ducking around playing cops and robbers. They had one of those slanting cellar doors, but there was a padlock on it, so I put the pickax under the hasp and pulled it out by the roots.

I was just bending over to pick up the shovel when—*wham!* Something hit me on the side of the head, and the next thing I knew I was looking straight up and the moon was wavering around in front of my eyes. Only—it wasn't the moon. It was Kenny's face and he was saying hoarsely: "Gene, Gene, Gene. . . ."

And then I remembered that *wham,* and I knew I hadn't been slugged. Somebody had taken a shot at me. I tried to raise my hand to feel my head, but I couldn't move it.

"Are you okay, kid?" Kenny babbled. "Gene, are you okay?"

I looked at him, and thought of that .38 he packed, and how gone he was on Lura Sloan. "Go to hell," I said.

"Thank God you're okay," he said, and did he sound phony!

He helped me up. I was bleeding a little, but the bullet had just glanced off my thick skull. He put on a big act about helping me into the house to fix me up, but every time I looked in his face, he looked some place else.

"What happened, kid?" he kept asking. "What happened? You trip over something?"

"Yeah," I said, "I fell down."

He banged on the kitchen door, but there was no answer. I didn't bother watching him put on his act. I felt dizzy and sick and leaned against the house.

I heard the door splinter when he kicked it in. He helped me inside, but by this time I had my own gun in my side pocket. He switched on the light.

There was Lura, stretched out on the floor with a bruise the size of an ashtray on her forehead. He went down on his knees beside her and felt all around the bruise with his fingertips to see if the bone had been splintered. I thought he was going to faint, the way he looked while he was crouched over her.

I looked around, and there was a coke bottle on the floor against the refrigerator. That would just about be it. I looked back and Kenny had Lura half in his arms. She was mumbling and he held her tighter.

"What, darling?" he begged. "What'd you say, honey? What, what?"

She opened her eyes. Her jaw was dropped. "Lew," she mumbled, "Lew . . ."

"What about Lew, darling?"

"No, Lew, no . . . no . . . nononono*no!*"

She screamed and grabbed him and he held her against him and rocked her, telling her that everything was okay, everything was okay, and what about Lew?

"He hit me," she whispered, "he hit me with a bottle."

"He was here?"

"He hit me . . ." she began to cry, and then she got hysterical, and finally Kenny carried her into the living room and laid her on the sofa and covered her with a blanket and sat there and patted her hand.

I didn't know what to think. She had been smacked all right, and she thought it was Lew. I just plain didn't know what to think.

"Oh, Kenny, Kenny," she said. "He hit me."

"You're all right now, honey."

"Hold me tight, Kenny. I'm so scared!"

"All right, honey, all right, all right . . ."

I just couldn't watch them doing that, and something went cold and hard inside me. I looked around again and spotted the cellar door off the kitchen. I went down. It was the usual kind of cellar. There was a furnace and a coal bin next to it. On one wall was the gas and electric meters, and on the side wall was a work bench with a little vise and a rack of tools where Sloan must have worked on his guns.

There was a long poker leaning against the furnace and I took it and thrust it into the coal pile from all angles. If there was a body there, I would have hit it, but there wasn't. I looked at the furnace. It was a little house and the furnace was little, too, and the door was just about wide enough for the coal shovel. She would have had to cut Sloan up in pieces to get him in there, but I looked all the same, even holding a match inside.

The grates were clean and there weren't even any ashes. I went over the cellar floor, inch by inch. It was cement, and if anybody had chopped it up for any reason, you would have spotted it a mile off. There wasn't even a patch on it, and you could have spotted that, too.

So I stood there with a splitting headaching, trying to figure it out.

I went upstairs. I looked in the living room and Lura had her arms around Kenny. He saw me and his lips went back from his teeth.

"Get lost!" he said.

"It'll take me longer than you," I said, and walked out.

I had a pocket flash, and I went over the grounds outside from front to back and side to side. It was all

grass and nobody had dug a hole in it for a long time. I was up the block going through the empty lots the same way when I saw Kenny come out of the house and get in his car and drive away.

It was four in the morning when I got home myself, but by that time I was absolutely positive that Sloan hadn't been put in the ground anyplace around that neighborhood.

I didn't sleep a wink. I just couldn't see Kenny taking a shot at me, but on the other hand, Lura Sloan was a dame some guys would have shot their grandmother for. I mean, she was so damn sexy that you couldn't be in the same room with her two minutes without wanting to do something about it.

I hated her on account of what she was doing to Kenny, but even me—all I had to do was look at her, and something turned over inside. Don't think I didn't feel hypocritical and plain rotten about it. She just did something to you, and you couldn't help yourself. I said I couldn't see Kenny taking a shot at me. That's a lie. I didn't want to admit it to myself, and that was the whole thing. I *could* see Kenny, or anybody else, taking a shot at me, if it was a choice between me and her. He knew I'd crucify her in a minute if I had the chance.

I went down to Headquarters around nine the next morning. I must have looked a wreck because the desk sergeant said, "You ought to lay off that stuff, Gene."

I told him to stick it, and went upstairs. I had some paperwork to do, and the print kept swimming in front of my eyes like guppies. I must have dropped off for a minute because all of a sudden there was Kenny shaking me by the shoulder.

"Here's the break, kid," he said. "She just heard from Sloan." He sounded all wound up.

I said, "Huh?" only half-awake.

"She heard from Sloan. She knows where he's hiding out, so come on, let's go! This is *it*."

My heart started to bump. His face looked so sharp and hard and I had the feeling he was saying one thing and meaning another. I got up and felt in my pocket to make sure I had my gun, and then we went downstairs to the car. I drove and he sat next to me with his lips pressed together.

The tension was building up in me and I asked, "Did she tell you where he's hiding out?"

He said, "Out in the country some place," and I could tell from the way he said it his mind was on something else entirely.

She was waiting for us at the house. She had on a skirt and a sweater and just looking at her, you had to breathe twice to catch one breath. Her face was white, but that only made her mouth look more like something you'd never satisfy even if you spent the rest of your life on it.

She came down the walk to the car. Her skirt was tight and every step she took told you just exactly what she was underneath and inside. I turned my head and stared straight ahead through the windshield, so I wouldn't have to look at her. I didn't want to feel any different about her than I did.

She sat between us, and it wasn't me she leaned against. She had a big straw pocketbook and she thrust it down into the pocket on the door next to Kenny.

"What'd he say on the phone?" he asked her.

"He needs money."

"Do you know where he is exactly?"

"Yes, but it's kind of hard to explain. It's up in the mountains the other side of Boonton. We used to go there on picnics. You can't get in with a car. You have to walk about a mile."

"Can we get in there without being seen?"

"Oh yes. The woods are very thick."

They both sounded all tensed up, and you could tell from the way they talked that if I hadn't been there, things would have been a lot different. A couple times I caught her looking at me from the side of her eyes, and each time she looked right away, and it gave me a cold feeling. Her and Kenny were holding hands where they thought I couldn't see them.

Every once in awhile I could feel her rub herself up against him, and once I heard her whisper; "Oh honey, honey, honey . . ." as though she just had to say something like that to him.

He said, "Shhhhh . . ." and she leaned away from me a little more, like she was pressing her cheek against his mouth.

Neither of them said a word to me.

We went all the way out Route 6 past the Jersey City reservoir, then down a long weedy road, then up another one and around and in back of a big stand of scrub birch, and that was where we stopped. We got out of the car, and the minute she hung that big straw handbag over her shoulder, I could see from the way it sagged on the strap that she had something heavy in it—something just about the weight of a gun.

There was a narrow path up the mountain, and she went first, and I hung back and Kenny went second. I wasn't letting either of them get behind me. We walked in for about a half hour, nobody saying a word, but every once in awhile, Kenny would look back over his shoulder to see if I was still there. His face was all strained. The path got rocky and steeper, and finally it was just a narrow little place between two deep ravines.

She stopped just where the path turned around a big overhanging rock. "I'll have to go the rest of the way alone," she whispered. "He

can see us from here on. I'll . . . bring him down here."

Kenny took her arm. "You can't go alone!"

"I'll be all right."

"For God sake, don't take chances. Give her your gun, Gene."

My heart started to go faster and there was a dry, hot taste in the back of my mouth. Was this what Kenny had meant by this being *it?* Was I the one that was going to be *it?*

"I ain't giving nobody my gun," I said.

"No, no, I don't want a gun," she said. "I'll be all right. Just wait here. I'll bring him down."

She went up the path and I watched her handbag bump heavily against the side of her leg. No, she didn't need a gun!

Kenny said to me, "You take that side of the road and I'll take this."

He disappeared down into the ravine on his side of the road. I went down in on my side—*but I didn't stay there!* I wasn't going to be any sitting duck when the bullets started flying. I kept moving up the mountain at the side of the road, but down out of sight. There was an old brook-bed and I could move fast without making any noise. I went about two hundred yards and then climbed the side of the ravine and squnched down behind a big rhododendron bush.

In about five minutes I saw Lura come walking up the path. She stopped about fifty feet below me and looked up at the rocky side of the mountain.

"Lew," she called. "Lew, are you there?"

My jaw dropped when this tall, skinny guy came out of the rocks.

"Lura!" he said, and ran down to her.

He grabbed her and hugged her and kissed her, and she kissed him back. He pushed her out to arms length and looked at her, then hugged and kissed her as though he couldn't get enough of it. He was so crazy about her that it hurt.

Then he said anxiously, "Everything's all right, isn't it, honey? I mean, they still think I did it, don't they?"

"Yes."

"They dont' suspect you at all?"

"No. But, Lew . . ."

He put his hand over her mouth. "I'd do it a million times for you, honey. A million times. You had good reason to shoot him, but I couldn't let you go through a court trial. Oh God, honey, I love you so much!"

All of a sudden, she jumped away from him and let out a terrible scream. "No, no, Lew!" she shrieked. "No no no, don't hit me, Lew, no no, please no . . ."

And her hand came out of her pocketbook and the gun was in it and her arm kept jerking as she pulled the trigger. The gun must have jammed because nothing happened.

I jumped up with a yell and ran at her. She screamed and ran across the path and Kenny came jumping out of the bushes. She tried to turn, but her feet went out from under her on the loose shale, and suddenly she wasn't there anymore.

When I got to where Kenny was standing, white as a sheet, I saw the sheer drop down the face of the mountain into the old quarry, and she was down at the bottom and she looked a mile away.

And after all she'd done to him and had tried to do, we actually had to knock Sloan cold to keep him from jumping after her.

On the way back, Kenny said dully to me, "Sorry I had to be such a louse to you, Gene, but it was the only way. She . . . well, fell for me, and I played up to it. I couldn't let you in on it because you're just too damn honest to be a good actor. I had to get her to the point where she had to get rid of Sloan because she wanted me to marry her."

I didn't believe him. "Why'd she knock Andresson off?" I asked.

"She was tired of him and he wouldn't go away. She got drunk one night and as much as told me, but I couldn't use it for evidence. I had a feeling about her right from the beginning. I mean, there was Sloan a champion pistol shot, yet she tried to tell us he used a shotgun on Andresson. That didn't add up."

"Hell no," I said. "Was she the one that took a shot at me that night?"

"Yes. I'd been watching the house, and Sloan wasn't near her, so she was the only one. She was afraid of you. I knew that, but I didn't know she was that afraid." He looked at me. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Oh sure sure. You suspected her right along and that's why you let her walk up the hill with a gun so she could knock Lew Sloan off too."

He held out his hand. There were six bullets in it.

"I took these out of her gun on the way up. If you remember, her handbag was in the door pocket right next to me. I knew you wouldn't give her your gun, and I wouldn't give her mine . . ." His voice trailed off.

I remembered then that he hadn't offered her his gun, and after a long time he said the one word that described the whole thing and the way we both felt.

"Hell," he said bitterly.

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A Carnival Owner with a Head on His Shoulders

by **MIL BIGSBY**

Double Talk

The stickup required some real cool thinking. But not the "Hey, Rube!" kind, exactly.

JOHN SHAW TOOK off his shoes and lay down on the bed in his house-trailer. It was two o'clock on the morning of July fifth and he had just finished twenty hours of hard work on the lot. The sun had

shone brightly and the carnival midway had been crowded. Now his tired assistants were pulling down the front flaps of the tents over the joints, and the ferris wheel men were covering up the seats. The last music box had been turned off and the lights on the carnival ground were blinking out one by one.

It had been a good day. John had hidden the bags of money in the bottom of the refrigerator, shoving an unwrapped loaf of bread in front to hide them.

Tomorrow Martha, his wife, would be discharged from the hospital. The money in the refrigerator would pay all of the outstanding bills, with a substantial sum left over.

He rose to answer the knock on the door, his mind still on his wife, and her long illness. It was probably Carl with the rest of the money collected from the concessions.

He stood in his stocking feet, his graying hair rumpled, his tall form bent. He spoke through the door. "Carl?" he asked.

"Yah," came a low voice.

John unlocked the door, then quickly tried to close it when he saw the two strange men standing there. The dark little man thrust a gun into John's stomach and jerked the door open with his free hand. "Back up," he said, in a cold level tone. "And keep your hands up!"

His companion followed close behind him. "This is a stickup!" he added.

John looked around him. Only the light over the sink was on, and the two men had moved into the murky darkness in the front part of the trailer. He rubbed his shirt sleeve over his sweating forehead, and the man with the gun rasped instantly: "I told you to keep your hands up!"

John could not see their faces well. They wore hats pulled low over their eyes and turned-up coat collars. He wondered how he could keep them from finding the money. In the sacks hidden behind the loaf of bread was more money he had collected in three previous weeks.

It had been a rainy season, and a tornado had blown the merry-go-round top all to pieces, and he'd had to replace that. A drunk had hit his wheel operator over the head and put the unfortunate man in bed for five days with cuts from the broken bottle. And now these vicious thugs!

"Let me sit down!" he said, and flopped on the couch, his hands still above his head.

"Get me that money," said the man with the gun.

John looked into beady black eyes that returned his stare mockingly. The nose was long, the eyebrows bushy in the lean, cruel face.

"What money?" asked John, sparring for time, visualizing the

loss of most of the 'take'—the payment on the trailer, Martha's hospital bill . . . But wait! Carl was somewhere out there with still more money to be brought in. The bulk of the money was in the refrigerator, however. Carl would only have about three hundred dollars when he came.

The man with the gun said: "Where's the money the woman who sells tickets at the merry-go-round gave you? I saw you carry it in here under your coat."

John knew the man was no carnival worker or he would not have said "Merry-go-round." He would have said "Jinny". If only Carl would come, so that he could give him some kind of high sign.

The younger man was getting impatient. He yanked open the knife-and-fork drawer and threw the eating utensils on the floor with a clatter.

"Where is the dough?" demanded his companion, prodding John under the arms with the gun so viciously that the carnival owner cried out in pain.

"Under the pillow," he groaned. The younger man stepped over the knives and forks and began to tear the bed apart. He threw the two pillows on the floor, shook out the covers and pushed the mattress off the bed.

"Ain't no money here," he said disgustedly. "You'd better come clean if you want to go on living." His face was stubble-darkened with a week's growth of beard, his leather jacket frayed and oil-stained.

"Try the couch where he's sitting!" said the man with the gun. He prodded John again. "Get over on the chair!" he ordered.

There was a knock on the door and Carl's voice called, "John, let me in!"

The gunman said in a low voice, "Get rid of him. If you try to warn him I'll blow you apart."

John licked his lips, spoke just loud enough for Carl to hear outside the trailer. "Carl, take that stuff from the joints with you. Rube wants the nut from the gate. You take care of this for me!"

"What the hell?" asked Carl in a puzzled voice. "Are you off your rocker?"

"Rube came here, complaining, bothering me. You take care of him!"

They heard Carl leave.

"Now where is that money?" the man with the gun demanded.

"Look in the top cupboard over the sink," John said. "There's a sugar bowl there with money hidden in it."

He'd remembered that Martha always kept the grocery money up there, and the thugs would find perhaps three or four dollars. That would keep them busy until Carl came back.

The younger man pushed the dishes angrily on the floor before he found the sugar bowl. John

sighed with relief. Every minute he could keep them occupied weighed in his favor.

The younger man found the tea pot. "A lousy four dollars and twenty cents is all," he muttered. The two thugs stopped to divide the find between them.

"Now where's the rest?" said the man with the gun. "I'm getting tired fooling around with you."

"Look in the ice box," said John. The older man still held the gun on him, while the younger hood dumped the few groceries on the floor. John thought of his own gun near the door. Maybe he could shoot them down as they left the trailer.

The two thugs eagerly grabbed the bags and started out the door. There were two dull thuds, and a loud scream. Someone turned on the outside light, and it shone on a group of carnival workers gathered around the fallen stickup men.

A police patrol car squealed to a halt and two officers ran over. John scooped up his bags of money and threw them back into the refrigerator again. Then he went to the door.

"Boys, I don't know how to thank you," said John. "What did Carl tell you?"

The police were busy handcuffing the two thugs and putting them into the radio car.

"He says, 'Get over to the boss' trailer and catch a couple rubes as they come out. John's getting robbed. Somebody run quick and call the cops.' "

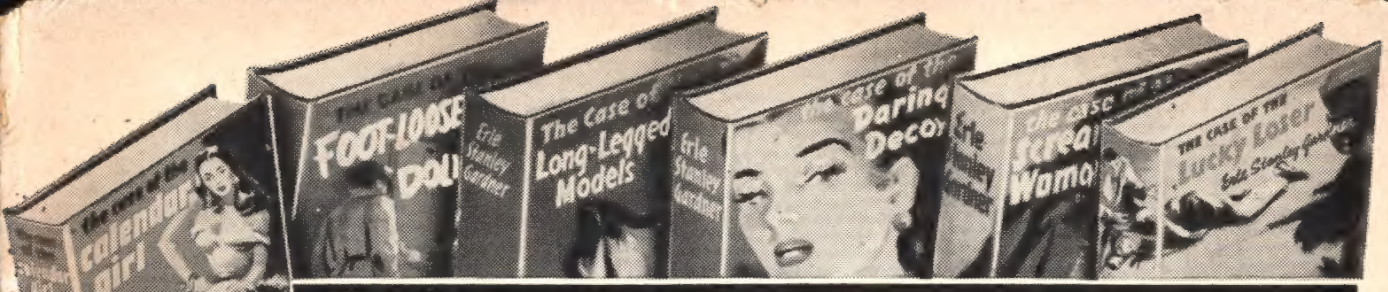
"Thank God, you understood me, Carl!" said John grasping his chief assistant's hand. "Pete, you and your men sure laid them out!"

"Will somebody explain all this to me!" said the Chief of Police who had just come up. "Some half crazy guy called on the phone, and told us where to come. He talked about 'Nuts on a gate' and 'Rubes' and a few other things I couldn't make head or tail of."

"It's simple to a carnival man," John said. "When I told Carl, 'Take that stuff from the joints with you' he knew what I meant. 'Joints' to us means 'concession stands'. I knew Carl was out collecting the money due me from the concession men and was going to bring it to me. There is nobody named 'Rube' in this outfit and sometimes we call people who are not with the carnival 'Rubes'. 'Nut on the Gate' means the admission fee at the gate, so he knew I meant money."

John laughed. "I suppose it does sound like double talk to somebody who ain't a carney.

"I knew these men were not carnival people because one of 'em said 'merry-go-round'. A carnival man would call it a 'Jinny'. When I said, 'Rube wants the nut from the gate' I was sure Carl would guess somebody was trying to get our money. You see, we understood each other!"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